

ROCKET STORIES

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SEPTEMBER 1953 35c

ROCKET STORIES SEPT. 1953



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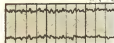
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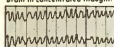
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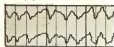
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ROCKET STORIES

SEPTEMBER, 1953

Vol. 1, No. 3

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THE MEN WHO DARED

In the lonely little bars that lie beyond the hydra-panic gardens of Pluto, they'll tell you that history is wrong, as it always is in the smaller things. There weren't any heroes among the starlanes. The men who went up from Earth in the days when the planets were being conquered were a special breed, all right; but they weren't heroes.

There was the first wave, and they came closest to it, perhaps. They weren't swashbucklers, though. They were men with too much curiosity and too much back education, who had to see for themselves. They crept up to the Moon with their instruments, knowing that five out of six would die, because they had to find out what was up there. They were too busy to be afraid, most of the time—and the rest of the time, they let the fear eat at them without complaining, because it had taken years of effort to get the chance, and they had to go. These were scientists, mostly. And they built a foot-hold and discovered that there were things there that all men wanted.

The second wave were the scouts, the traders, the prospectors—and the nonconformists who had to leave Earth. They went out there to make a killing in a hurry, or to be killed. Most of them died among the arid wastes of Mars, or in the molten magma of Mercury; they didn't die nobly—they died chasing one last rainbow's end where the pot of gold would be. They died because they were sick with greed, or beaten into hopelessness. But they found the trails, and they showed the way.

The pioneers followed. There were trading cities on the planets by then, and ways of living that weren't too rugged. They came out in the patched old ships, bringing their families, to settle on a place of their own, and to build themselves and their children a way of life with freedom they couldn't find on the cramped space of Earth, or in the cramped and ossified culture they left behind. And like most men who went out to make their own way, they took with them most of the things they claimed to hate, and imparted the others. They built towns, and safety. They built new atmospheres around the planets, because they needed them for their families. They began the end of an era.

And finally, there came the immigrants. They were people who brought businesses with them, and who profited by the sweat of the ones who had gone before. They took what was left at the frontier of the planets and made it a part of Earth. They brought their video shaws, their politicians, their little business clubs. They found some security, and they left a series of well-ordered worlds, one like another.

It was an old story, and none of them were heroes. John Dalworthy didn't die gloriously on the Moon, shouting to the Earth in the sky above him the immortal words of the books: "We're going on!" He died when he was trying to assemble a new fin for his ship and got so mad at a screw he couldn't turn that he draped the fin on himself in a blind rage. When they carried him into the airtent and tried to save him, he came to only long enough to mutter: "If they think they're going on without me . . ."

And Pat Brannerman, the gal who was the first woman on Venus, didn't go there to marry a man and civilize a planet. She went there because she stowed away on what she thought was a ship going from Chicago to Melbourne, and found out too late that it was one-way passage off Earth. She married the captain of the local police force to keep him from throwing her in jail for stowing away illegally. And it wasn't until she had eleven kids and was sixty and getting catchety that she decided to civilize the planet—because she was getting bald, and couldn't find a wig-maker!

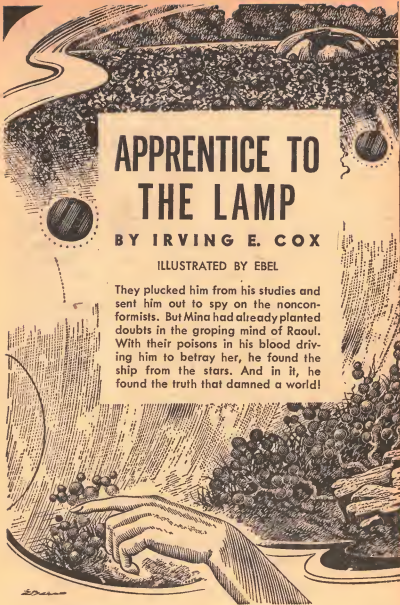
They dared to settle the planets because there was nothing else they could do. They did it because they wanted better food to eat, or better women to marry, or because they couldn't get any other job.

So they tell you on Pluto. And they're right, of course. But stick around a while. Watch the men who tell you that when the great star ships came in on their first return from Aldebaran and Deneb. Watch the guys who get off, and the gals who greet them.

They're not heroes. They'll never know what heroism is. And yet, out there among the star trails, there's the raw surge of life in their veins, and the quick laugh when death looks in their eyes. They do it for the same old reasons, just as men conquered the planets. But because they're doing it, they're heroes. And they can't help themselves. It isn't a life for anyone but heroes.

Pull up a stool, partner, and get the wax out of your ears! Because a new ship has just come in, and there are men who have tales to tell . . .

WADE KAEMPFFER



APPRENTICE TO THE LAMP

BY IRVING E. COX

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

They plucked him from his studies and sent him out to spy on the nonconformists. But Mina had already planted doubts in the groping mind of Raoul. With their poisons in his blood driving him to betray her, he found the ship from the stars. And in it, he found the truth that damned a world!



The mob had gathered thickly on both sides of the Way of the Gods, the wide road that ran through the heart of the City. They were shouting in unison.

"Kill! Kill! Kill the Noncon!"

Raoul pushed against the back of the mob, silently praying to the God of the Glowing Lamp that he would find a place near the curb.

The shouting mounted to a thundering din as the Procession emerged from the Court of New Understanding and moved toward the Temple of the Tester, the cube-shaped, white marble building in the center of the city. The Bishops' fires blazed up in five braziers on the roof of the Temple — gold-colored flame for the Bishop of Invisible Powers, green for the Bishop of Earth, blue for the Bishop of Man, white for the Bishop of Happiness, and scarlet for the Bishop of Custom. The Tester strode from the Temple and stood waiting on the Sacred Pedestal, a tiny figure clothed in white, almost lost before the massive building towering behind him. Raoul had never been any closer to the Tester, nor was he ever likely to be; yet, even at such a distance, he felt the instinctive surge of respect for the man who symbolized the power of the Gods. With his

right hand Raoul made the mystic circle of obeisance in the air.

A drum corps of the Order of Justice, clothed in flowing scarlet, marched at the head of the Procession. Immediately behind them came the Bishops, held high on golden litters. Raoul's own Bishop came first, the Bishop of Invisible Powers. His glittering throne was born by a dozen high priests of the three Orders over which he ruled — four from the Order of Flowing Oil, robed in black with the white derrick symbol blazing on their sleeves; four from the Order of Captive Water, robed in blue with the rectangular symbol of the dam on their sleeves; and four from the Order of the Glowing Lamp, dressed in cloth of gold and wearing the sun symbol on their robes.

Apprenticed to the Order of the Glowing Lamp, Raoul, like his high priest, wore a gold-colored robe. His skin-tight, knee-length shorts and his soft-soled shoes were of the same color. Except for the robe, bound loosely around his throat, he was naked above the waist.

Every other man in the throng was identically dressed, although the colors of their robes and their sleeve emblems were characteristically different, de-

pending on the Order to which each belonged. The women, of course, wore the colors of their current mates.

Raoul was surprised to see so many brown robes of the Order of the Plot and Acre among the crowd, but he knew that most of them were refugees. Hundreds had fled into the city in recent weeks because of the trouble the Noncons were making at farms in the north.

The Bishop of Invisible Powers was followed by the brown-robed Bishop of Earth, whose litter was carried by high priests of the Order of the Plot and Acre, the Order of the Stone and Wood, and the Order of the Sea and Stream. There came next another drum corps of the Order of Justice, followed by the Bishop of Man, wearing a robe of mottled purple and white. He was borne by high priests of the Order of the Cloth, the Order of the Healer, and the Order of the Book. Since the Bishop of Happiness ruled no Orders, he walked alone, surrounded by whirling ranks of his dancers and trumpeters, their spangles quivering in the sunlight.

The Bishop of Custom, awesome in his scarlet robe, came last. He walked, too, since his high priests carried the barred prisoner's cage on their should-

ers. The seething drums and trumpets, the crying fury of the mob burst into a volcano of sound as the Procession stopped before the Sacred Pedestal.

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"

"How do you know he deserves to be slain?" The words were shouted close to Raoul's ear. Frantically he tried to examine the faces of his neighbors, to see which had expressed the Noncon heresy. But the mob pressed so close around him he could not move.

High priests of the Order of Justice pulled the cringing Noncon out of his cage and pushed him up the steps toward the Tester. The prisoner, lacerated with the wounds he had received in the Court of New Understanding, collapsed on the stone, weakly clawing at the cold granite, his long, white hair falling down over his eyes. Each of the Bishops mounted the Pedestal and, in turn, beat the Noncon with their metal thonged whips, in order to drive the evil from him so that his death might be pure.

"The man is very old. Does his suffering amuse you?"

It was the same voice. Raoul strained against the mob, jamming his elbow into naked ribs. His neighbors grunted in the ecstasy of their shouting, but

they moved enough for Raoul to escape. He saw a figure moving along the fringe of the crowd — a muffled figure, and a swirling, brown cape.

He inched his way free. He thought he saw the figure melt into the crowd some fifty feet away. He ran in pursuit, and at that moment the shouting of the mob rose to a final frenzy of joy and fell away languidly. Raoul knew that the Tester had at last given the death wires to the Noncon and the old man was dead.

The crowd began to disperse as Raoul roughly snatched the shoulder of the person he was pursuing. The brown cloak fell away. Raoul looked into the pale, angry face of a woman.

"So this is how city men treat refugees who come here for help?" she demanded.

"I — I'm mistaken," he said. "I thought you were — that is — someone else." There were so many people of the Order of the Plot and Acre in the city; it was easy for him to have followed the wrong person. Raoul was sure no woman had spoken the treason in his ear. Since women were apprenticed to none of the Orders — except, occasionally, to the Order of Happiness — women obviously could not become Noncons.

"You frightened me," she

said. "I've never seen one of your Processions before; the excitement must have gone to my head."

"Women are poorly equipped to withstand strong emotion," he agreed, repeating the familiar truism.

They had been carried along the walk by the dispersing crowd. Raoul drew her into the entryway of an eating house.

"Your mate has come to the city with you?" he asked. It was the traditional question. He had to know her answer before they could talk further. And, for the first time in his life, it mattered a great deal to him. Even on such a short acquaintance, he found her indefinably attractive and different from the women he had met at the mating houses.

"My mate?" Her lip curled. "It means nothing to me where he is, or what Order he serves."

"Then you are ready to change your cloak?"

"In my own good time."

"Mine is very attractive."

"Ah, but what of the man who wears it?" She looked up into his face, smiling gently. The very way in which she phrased the question set her apart; no city woman would have dared to ask it.

Raoul nodded toward the eating house. "Let's share a happiness drink and begin our ac-

quaintance. I have a part of an hour before Pere Marin will expect me back at my bench."

He led her into the eating house, already thronged with citizens relaxing after the tension of the Procession. By custom Raoul had no right of escort until she had admitted that she was ready to change her robe. Like all women, she was beautiful — a tanned, firm, healthy body, almost as tall as Raoul's; and an oval face framed with waves of dark hair. But beauty was commonplace; every woman learned how to make herself attractive, just as every man learned the skills to serve the God of his Order. Yet Raoul saw a distinctive quality in this strange girl, something unaccountably different reflected in the bright, impenetrable depths of her eyes. There was none of the glazed, superficial acceptance of affection that he found in every city girl he met at the mating houses. With a shock he suddenly understood the difference: this woman had an individuality and personality of her own — a woman with the traits of a man!

When he found an empty table, he made a point of removing his golden robe so that she could see the virility of his youth. She eyed him speculative-

ly, but he had the disconcerting realization that a kind of laughter bubbled beneath the curtain of her eyes. He sat close to her so that their bodies were touching, and again he had a feeling that the maneuver merely amused her.

"Since you have offered me your cloak," she said when he had brought their happiness drinks from the counter, "perhaps you might tell me your name."

"Raoul IV."

"Mine is Mina — Mina Farnen." She sipped her happiness drink. "Then you're still an apprentice, Raoul?"

"My Name-taking comes at the Maturation Ceremony next month," he explained. "I will be called Raoul Liteman then; but the full name is yours, whenever you take my robe. You see, the apprenticeship in the Order of the Glowing Lamp is longer than any of the others because our God has given us so many complex machines to service. Consequently, the Tester grants us special mating permission before we become novices."

"Then you already have a mate, Raoul? What becomes of her if I accept your robe?"

"None now." He swirled his happiness drink in its tiny glass, watching the reflection of the ceiling light on the liquid, and

sending a quick prayer to the God of the Glowing Lamp. "I've visited all the mating houses again and again, but I can't find the woman I want. When I was fifteen I took a mate and we lived together for a time, but it didn't work out." He looked intently into her face. "There was so little that we had in common, so little for us to talk about! She was so pliant, and so willing — and so entirely negative."

"Isn't that all men ask of a woman, Raoul?"

"But there must be more to it than that, Mina!"

"What makes you think I would be any different?"

"Because of the way you talk to me now; because our chance meeting can only mean that it was decreed by the Gods."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that. You mistook me for someone else. Who, Raoul?"

"A Noncon in the crowd. It doesn't matter. The Order of Justice will pick him up before he does any great harm."

"A friend of the old man's? The one who was killed?"

"Yes."

"I'm not acquainted with city ways, Raoul; tell me, what crime had the old man committed?"

"He was a Zynetiss."

"I heard the crowd shouting

that, and I dare say I shouldn't admit my ignorance, but I must know, Raoul. What is a Zynetiss?"

Raoul laughed pleasantly. "I thought everyone knew that."

"In the country we're cut off from the news."

"Why, a Zynetiss is a Noncon; disloyal and unfaithful to his Order."

"But what does a Zynetiss do that makes him disloyal."

"You women and your questions!" Raoul laughed again, but he felt vaguely uncomfortable. "A Zynetiss is simply disloyal; that's all there is to it."

"What about the old man? What did he do?"

"How should I know that?"

"But you were shouting with the rest of them, Raoul. You wanted to see him killed."

"That's what the Processions are for, Mina."

"Surely, you don't shout for a man's life without being certain that he deserves to have it taken!"

"All Noncons are evil; a Zynetiss is a Noncon."

"How do you know when a person is a Noncon?"

"That is decided by the Order of Justice when a prisoner is taken to the Court of New Understanding."

"Then how does a Noncon be-

come a prisoner? How does he give himself away?"

"By acting like a Zynetiss."

"But exactly what does a Zynetiss do, Raoul? I must know! I'm a stranger in the city; I'm surrounded by thousands of people I never saw before. How am I to know which of them are loyal, which I can trust?" She hesitated and her voice sank to a whisper. "How can I be sure about you, Raoul?"

He tried to laugh again, but the gesture fell flat when he saw the look of anxiety in her eyes. "These things are beyond the comprehension of a woman, Mina." He got up and pulled his golden robe around his shoulders. "I have to get back to my bench, or Pere Marin will be reporting me to the Bishop. Which mating house are you staying in, Mina? Tell me; I want to see you again."

"Oh, yes; my address." She seemed confused and frightened. "I'm not sure I want you to know, Raoul."

He drew her to her feet and tilted her head so that he could kiss her lips; she submitted without responding. "Most of the refugees are at the Acre House," he said softly. "Is that it?"

She looked away. "Yes, that's it, Raoul."

"I'll see you tonight, Mina."

"Very well, Raoul; tonight." Her tone was dead and emotionless, entirely blank.

Such a parting was by no means encouraging. When he went to the Acre House that evening she might refuse to see him; she might already have selected an experimental mate from another Order. Somehow, the idea that he could not win her immediately made Mina more than ever attractive to him.

She had turned cold, Raoul guessed, because she was worried about the Noncons in the city. It was understandable, since it was Noncon depredations that had driven Mina from her farm and turned her into a refugee. But, in trying to understand the enormous evil of the Zynetiss, her mind—woman-like—had become emotionally unbalanced to the point of suspecting even Raoul himself.

Or had she, somehow, penetrated Raoul's own, nagging self-accusation? Once again he was forced to face the frightening question: was he, in truth, subconsciously a Noncon because he cheated on the Tests? Raoul had no way of knowing; he had no way of finding out. He could ask no one for help.

The most disorganizing factor in his feeling of guilt was his inability to be sure even of

the degree of his own evil. Perhaps he had done nothing; perhaps such cheating was commonplace and always had been. The truth of the matter was that Raoul had no way of specifying precisely what behavior characterized a Noncon. Mina's questions had made him aware of that. As he considered the matter, it seemed that, if he knew that, it might give him a way of defining his own degree of guilt. And surely it would be safe to ask Pere Marin about Noncons.

Raoul was the last of Pere Marin's apprentices to return from the Procession. He threw his robe over the rack and went to his workbench. As he pulled out his stool, heralds from the Order of Truth entered the workroom and announced one of the periodic Classification Tests.

Pere Marin herded his charges into the twenty school desks in a corner of the room. Each apprentice furtively made the circle sign to the God of the Glowing Lamp as the heralds passed out the test booklets and set up the giant timer.

Every apprentice, by the time he was six or seven, knew that he had to make a score close to the norm, or the Order of Truth would select him for death in the Elimination Ceremony. Raoul's particular group of apprentices had begun as a class of thirty-

five; over the years the Tests had reduced the number to twenty. The realization that children who made low scores would be killed was difficult to face, and yet Raoul and his fellow apprentices eventually found it acceptable. A low score clearly defined the unfit; to purify the society of the future, the unfit had to be removed.

To Raoul the Tests had always seemed quite simple. It had become his habit to answer questions until he knew his score approximated the norm, and to leave the balance of the booklet blank. He always supposed that everyone else did the same thing, but he never talked about it with the others because any discussion of the Tests was taboo.

But when Raoul took his fifth Classification Test—he had been twelve at the time—he stumbled upon a new factor, and the truth had lain festering in his mind for more than eight years. Raoul had idly watched his companions. Poor Billy II had struggled through the booklet to the very last page, chewing his pencil in terrified anxiety and answering everything he could. Most of his answers, Raoul had covertly observed, had been quite wrong; and Billy, of course, had been selected for Elimination at the next Ceremony.

But Raoul had also watched Michael III. Michael, like Billy, had plodded entirely through the Test, but his answers had been generally correct. At the time Raoul had wondered why Michael bothered, since he must have known, as Raoul did, that he had long since safely achieved the established norm.

Yet Michael III had been chosen for Elimination, too!

The Order of Truth had reported that his score was as low as Billy's. Raoul knew differently. Later Raoul had seen the same thing happen to three other apprentices. The Tests eliminated not only inferior minds—the recognizably unfit—but superior minds as well.

On each Test thereafter Raoul instinctively made the norm score, and nothing higher. Slowly he realized that he was the only apprentice in his group who did so. The others struggled to make the highest scores they could; and, when they did, they were promptly selected for Elimination. Raoul gradually understood that he alone was intentionally cheating. He had no desire to join the Higher Circle of Gods quite yet; he found too much pleasure in the strength and joy of youth. Yet, by saving himself from Elimination, he was cheating the

Gods. Was that, perhaps, the essence of the Zynetiss evil?

When the Test was over that afternoon, the heralds collected the booklets, and Pere Marin dismissed the apprentices. Since the names of the unfit were not announced until the hour of the Elimination Ceremony, it was tradition for apprentices to seek immediate relief from their tension in the various Temples of Happiness. But Raoul lingered at his desk until the workroom was deserted. Pere Marin came and stood beside him, frowning anxiously.

"You're not worried, are you, Raoul?"

"No, Pere Marin."

"You passed the Test; you always do. Then hurry, boy! Every Temple of Happiness will be jammed to overflowing in another ten minutes." Still Raoul did not move, and the old man bent over him, slipping his arm around Raoul's shoulder and running his thin, wrinkled hand over the skin of Raoul's chest. "You're hot, Raoul! Why didn't you tell me you were sick! I'll call the Order of Healers and we'll have everything fixed up in—"

Raoul pulled away and stood up, flexing his muscles. "Nothing's wrong with me, Pere Marin. I just want to talk."

"Oh; so that's it." Pere Marin smiled his relief. "You're thinking of taking another mate, and you want to tell me all about her. Well, by all means! It's about time. Come back to my apartment; we'll have a happiness drink, and toast your luck."

Raoul followed the old man into the small, pleasant lounge adjoining the workroom. It was a familiar and pleasant room to Raoul. Here Pere Marin had turned him over his knee when Raoul had been caught, as a child of five, stealing electronic tubes from the storeroom so he could use them to build a toy temple. Here Pere Marin had signed Raoul's report cards from the general school, and chided him for doing so poorly in his spelling. Here, too, Raoul had heard his first stories of the Gods, when Pere Marin had read to his apprentices out of the Temple Book.

Pere Marin was the only parent Raoul knew. Like everyone else, Raoul had been born in a House of Dedication. He had no idea who his mother and father had been, and no curiosity to find out. They were simply a chance mating in the past which had given him his biological heritage. That they had not created him one of the unfit was enough to ask or expect. In

the House of Dedication, before Raoul was two days old, he, along with thirty-five other boys born in that same year, had been apprenticed to the Order of the Glowing Lamp. The thirty-five babies had been turned over to Pere Marin, who had reared them in an environment suitable to their service to the God of the Glowing Lamp.

In the more than twenty years that Raoul had lived with him, Pere Marin had taken a succession of mates. Some had stayed for only a week; others, for as long as two years. But the women had had no effect upon the apprentices; even their names Raoul had long since forgotten.

Raoul loved and respected Pere Marin; yet the questions he wanted to ask were almost impossible to phrase. For some minutes he lay back in the cushioned guest chair, sipping his happiness drink. Raoul poured himself a second. Only when he felt the tingling excitement whispering like an electric shock over his nerves did he find the courage to ask:

"Pere Marin, why do we kill Noncons?"

"You know that as well as I do, Raoul. A Noncon is a Zynetiss."

"But why is a Zynetiss evil?"

"I have read to you from the

Temple Book." The old man reached for the well-worn, red-backed volume lying on his desk.

"And I can quote the sacred words," Raoul said impatiently, repeating in a monotone, "*And the Earth was ruled by the Law of the Zynetiss, and the Gods were cast out and reviled. And the Zynetiss taught their evil to all men, even to the little children. And the Zynetiss fire scorched the fields and turned cities into white dust and made even the Forbidden Place naked to the sun.*" Raoul clenched his fists angrily. "So it goes, Pere Marin—on and on. Don't read me the same old story; tell me what it means!"

Pere Marin's hand shook as he reached for his happiness drink. "The words of the Gods speak only to our hearts, Raoul."

"What is the Law of the Zynetiss, Pere Marin?"

"The Gods triumphed and destroyed it, Raoul."

"But, if we no longer know, how can we slay a man for believing in it? How do we know he is guilty?"

"The Gods of Truth and Justice reveal what is needful to their Orders."

The old man poured himself another happiness drink and gulped it quickly. Then he

reached for the Temple Book and thumbed through the pages until he found the passage he wanted. He read slowly and solemnly, "*The blood ran deep, and the fires blazed high, and the Zynetiss said, I give man the power, but its use he chooses for himself; am I to be blamed for his evil? And the Temples were burned and empty. But at last the Gods took compassion. The First Tester came among men and selected the Chosen. So it was the new place and the new way came to be, and the Gods were satisfied.*" Pere Marin closed the Temple Book. "That is your answer, Raoul. We are the Chosen; we honor the Gods."

Raoul stood up and paced the little room, slowly fingering his lower lip. "Pere Marin," he said, "the Temple Book speaks only of the Zynetiss. We call them Noncons. Why? What does our word mean?"

The old man snatched Raoul's hand and held it tight. His face was suddenly pale, his lips thin and bloodless. "Raoul, we live in peace and comfort. We have food in abundance and happiness. It is enough. None of your questions can create anything better. You fill your mind with the poison of doubt, and it will destroy you. Forget it! Go out, now, and enjoy yourself."

Raoul turned away. He understood, then, how Mina Farmen had felt when he put off her questions. Thinking of her again, he suddenly realized how late it was; there was still a slim chance that she might be waiting for him at the Acre House.

He drew on his golden robe and went outside. It was dark. He looked up and counted the visible stars. Only seven candles had been lighted that night. He counted again to be sure. The omen, especially to an apprentice of Raoul's Order, was definitely evil. Yet he could not force himself to turn back. The prospect of seeing Mina again meant more than all the portents of the sky.

He gave himself what protection he could by drawing the sacred circle of obeisance three times in the night air, and by wearing his robe reversed. He felt better. He looked up at the God Lamps and smiled.

But doubt was in his mind, and it began to spill over into everything he had been taught. He knew, of course, that the sky was an inverted crystal sphere fixed above the Earth, so that the sun could run its appointed daily course with no danger of falling. But were the night stars truly Lamps of the God? Wasn't

it just as possible that the light might be flakes of the sun caught during the day by uneven projections of the crystal sphere? In Pere Marin's room Raoul had drunk more happiness drink than was altogether good for him. He knew that, but he could not control the recklessness of his mind. If it were conceivable that the God of the Glowing Lamp had nothing to do with the stars, it was just as reasonable that, the Gods had nothing to do with the complex machines tended by the various Orders.

The great dynamos and generators in the Temples of the Glowing Lamp gave the city light. But, if Raoul and his fellow apprentices could learn to repair them and rebuild them, wasn't it possible that another man in another time had built them originally? The heresies stormed through Raoul's mind in a flood. Couldn't he, just as easily, apply the knowledge he already possessed and create a new machine—something totally different, something devised by man himself? So far as he knew, it had never been done before. Every machine was said to be the gift of one of the Gods. Yet, why not? The potentialities were limitless, and the possibilities dazzling.

Even in his state of exaggerated elation, Raoul knew it

would be impossible to explain himself to Pere Marin or even to his fellow apprentices. Strangely enough, he thought he could tell Mina Farmen; he expected not only understanding from her, but sympathy and encouragement.

Defiantly he stopped and reversed his robe once again, laughing up at the crystal globe of the sky. They were called Gods because they had made the machines. Raoul could outdo them. And would his achievement make him the equal of the Gods? No—far better; he would be a man, a man with a free and unfettered mind, a man unafraid.

Raoul's self-confidence soared. Even when he inquired at the Acre House and found that Mina Farmen was not there, he felt only disappointment rather than dismay. It was no trick brought about by evil omens, but simply an understandable deception. Mina had not wanted to see him again because he had frightened her. However, since she was in the city, she would be staying at one of the mating houses; with patience Raoul could find her.

In three hours he had exhausted the probabilities and still not located Mina. Even her name was unknown. There was one mating house left, a small, for-

gotten building buried behind the massive Court of New Understanding. It was largely occupied by elderly ladies whose mating days were over. Yet by custom the lounges were gaily lighted and the ladies brightly dressed; and every evening they sat patiently waiting for the gentleman callers who no longer came.

Raoul's visit was something of a sensation. The white-haired crones felt the folds of his robe and touched the firm skin of his arm. They regretted that Mina Farmen was not staying with them; but when Raoul turned to go, they became persuasive, insistent, and maudlin in rapid stages.

"Let us give you just one happiness drink; just one."

Since Raoul had already disturbed them, it seemed an unavoidable courtesy to stay at least for a moment. Besides, he wanted time to think through logical possibilities. If Mina were not at any of the mating houses, where else could he look for her?

The elderly ladies made a great fuss over Raoul. They asked his name and age, and excitedly speculated among themselves as to whether or not any of them might have been his mother. They were forced to the conclusion that the near-

est possible relationship was that of grandparent, but that by no means cooled their pleasure. They plied him with the happiness drink, and shyly showed him treasured mementos of the past. They showered him with delicate cakes and cookies; if he tried the art of one, it became necessary for him to sample the work of them all.

Raoul had intended to stay only a few minutes, but almost an hour passed before he was able to work his way back to the door. The street outside was black and deserted, the buildings dark. Raoul's head swam; the ladies had been altogether too generous with the happiness drink. He had to walk very slowly to keep from staggering.

As he passed the yawning, bronze doors of the Court of New Understanding, he saw a silent group of men, wearing the robes of the Order of Justice, approaching the building, dragging a struggling prisoner between them. When they came abreast of Raoul, the man cried out,

"I have done no wrong! I speak only for equality!"

One of his captors struck his head with a chain and the prisoner screamed in agony.

"Have mercy, in the name of the Gods!" the man whimpered.

Suddenly four figures, muffled

in brown robes, swarmed out of the shadows of the doorway and attacked the men. Taken by surprise, the leader fell back, calling to Raoul the traditional appeal,

"Help! In the name of the Tester!"

The shock cleared Raoul's head; he responded with the pattern he had learned. He plunged into the conflict, smashing back the attackers.

The brown-robed band were armed with short, heavy, metal bars which they used as clubs; the initial surprise was in their favor. In a matter of seconds, three men of the Order of Justice lay sprawled on the road with bleeding heads. The two who remained began to drag their struggling prisoner toward the doors of the Court.

The attackers sprang after them. One of the novices of the Order of Justice was killed as he cupped his lips to cry for help. The other dodged the falling club, but it struck his shoulder and he fell to his knees, groaning with pain. Raoul ran to his assistance, dragging a brown-robed figure back from the fallen man. The robe pulled free; the attacker turned; and Raoul was looking into the face of Mina Farmen.

He tried to speak, but he felt helplessly paralyzed. In the

background he saw the rest of Mina's band carrying away the prisoner they had rescued. Then the novice of the Order of Justice pulled his Sacred Weapon from his belt and aimed it at Mina. She backed away, her hand clasped over her lips in terror.

Raoul sprang at the man, knocking the weapon from his hands and beating his head against the stone. Mina smiled and fled.

Raoul stood up, wiping his bloody hands on the corner of his robe. Five men lay dead or unconscious in the quiet street and their Noncon prisoner was gone. Raoul had intervened to help the Noncon escape; by tradition, that made him equally guilty.

A sweat of cold terror beaded his forehead. He began to run. Five blocks away, the fear slowly subsided and Raoul was able to reason again: He had helped a Noncon escape, true; but none of the surviving novices of the Order of Justice could specifically identify him, except as an apprentice or novice of the Order of the Glowing Lamp. In a very few minutes the city patrols would be fanning through the deserted streets; any member of Raoul's Order who had the misfortune to be keeping late hours that evening would

suffer some unpleasant grilling in the Court of New Understanding.

To save himself, Raoul had to get off the street. It would do no good for him to go to a mating house, since the time of his arrival would be noted by too many witnesses. But the old dormitory adjoining the Temple workroom would be empty. Raoul and his fellow apprentices had spent their childhood there; occasionally, they did so even now. Yet Raoul knew none would be in the dormitory that night, because the others had all gone to the Temple of Happiness.

Raoul slipped quietly into the dormitory through an unlocked window. He put his clothes in the cleaning tank; in the morning the bloodstains would be gone. Adjusting the stream of water Raoul showered, carefully scrubbing the evidences of conflict from his own skin. As he climbed into his bunk, he felt sleepily at ease, vaguely pleased with himself.

But the self-satisfaction was transformed into terror at dawn. Pere Marin awoke Raoul in the cold, gray light and turned him over to four armed men of the Order of Justice. In silence they escorted him to the Court of New Understanding and ushered him into the magnificent, red-

walled chambers of the Bishop of Custom. Raoul stole himself for the ordeal of inquisition.

He was prepared for anything except cordiality. The tall, thin, narrow-faced Bishop extended his hand and invited Raoul to sit on the damask cushion before the scarlet throne.

"May I give you the congratulations of the Order of Justice for the service you have rendered us?" The Bishop smiled, but only with his lips. His voice was shrill and nervous. "The Noncon Zynetisa escaped, yet we know you helped us to the extent of your ability."

Raoul was bewildered. He felt that he should say something, but he had no idea what. Suddenly his inner fear collapsed and he felt wildly amused at the mistake the Bishop had made. He relaxed a little and his golden robe slipped from his shoulder; the Bishop saw the narrow bruise paralleling Raoul's collar bone, and he ran his fingers over it softly.

"A wound of honor," he intoned, "suffered in the service of the Gods; may the God of Truth reward you with a speedy healing."

The prayer was repeated in a muttered undertone behind Raoul; from the corner of his eye he saw that the high priests

of the Order had gathered in a semi-circle around him, close to the scarlet throne.

"Raoul, we have brought you here not only to give you our thanks, but because we feel you can do us additional service," the Bishop went on. "We wish to appoint you special agent of our Order." It was an assignment rarely given. That it was offered was a mere formality; by custom, Raoul had no right to refuse. "There is danger involved, yet honor from the Gods if you succeed. We know that the Noncons have a stronghold somewhere in the hills; we know that the prisoner they stole from us was taken there; we ask you to find that stronghold for us."

Raoul made the circle sign of obeisance. "Sir, you judge me of an ability that I do not possess. How can I, alone, find what all your men have failed to locate?"

The Bishop sighed and stroked Raoul's naked arm gently. "I said there was danger, Raoul; I am asking you to serve as bait in a trap. We are sure the Noncons who escaped last night will remember your face. Revenge against the Chosen burns bright in their evil minds. If their agents see that you have gone alone into the territory which they terrorize with their pillage

and depredation, they will make every effort to take you prisoner. You must allow yourself to be taken. The Noncons do not execute their enemies; they simply attempt to convert them to the Law of the Zynetiss. Only a man of your proven faith, Raoul, can remain strong enough to resist words. Once they have taken you to their hidden camp, pretend to join them; escape when you have an opportunity. Bring us the location of their camp and—"

Raoul knew that the shrill, persuasive voice went on, but the words were suddenly gibberish; a violent, flaming pain stabbed into the flesh of his arm and surged through his body. In a moment it was over. The Bishop was holding his hand, and a high priest was backing away from him, shaking an empty hypodermic needle in the air.

"It is merely a disease immunization," the Bishop explained, smiling again with his lips. "We give it to all our agents when we send them into the backlands. You understand, Raoul, what we expect you to do?"

"Yes." The pain was gone. Raoul hoped that neither his tone nor his expression betrayed the plan he had formed.

Through an inexplicable error in judgment, the Bishop of Custom had mistaken Raoul's motive in intervening in last night's attack. Obviously, the novice of the Order of Justice whom Raoul had beaten had not yet recovered consciousness; when he did, the mistake would be rectified, and with a vengeance. But now the Bishop's misplaced confidence was giving Raoul a way to escape from the city. If Raoul could, in fact, manage to be captured by the Noncons, he would find Mina Farmen again, and he would never return to the city and the crushing captivity of the Gods.

"You must leave at once," the Bishop went on. "We have a horse saddled in the courtyard. We will make all necessary explanations to your Order. Ride north to the village of Wyne; somewhere beyond it, between the Great Desert and the Forbidden Place, is the Noncon stronghold. The prayers of the Gods go with you, Raoul."

By way of official blessing, the Bishop inscribed the circle sign above Raoul's shoulder. Raoul was escorted through the bleak corridors of the Court of New Understanding, past the rows of cells, into the stone-walled yard. The priests of the Order of Justice saluted as he mounted the horse and rode

slowly into the empty street, which was beginning to stir sluggishly with the first life of a new day.

Raoul wanted to spur his animal to a gallop, yet he was aware that even now unwarranted haste might betray him. Logically, he would be expected to stop at the Temple of the Glowing Lamp and offer up a prayer to the dynamo. The sun had risen when he came out, and the city streets were beginning to fill with people. As Raoul began to mount his horse again, a tall, white-haired man, swathed in a white robe, brushed close to him.

"You're a fool," he whispered; his voice was rich, deep, resonant. "The Order of Justice made inquiries last night; the old crones in the mating house knew your name, and the Order is fully aware that you permitted the Noncons to escape. They know you recognized the girl, too."

Raoul's mouth was cold with fear. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Your brother, perhaps; perhaps your father. It doesn't matter. I'm interested in your case; I have been for quite some time. Now, because of your foolishness, you're in danger of smashing all my plans."

"But the Bishop is allowing me to escape!"

"Because he knows you'll re-

turn; and he knows you'll give them the location of the Noncon stronghold. The immunization shot was an hypnotic; you'll come back because you can't help yourself. And you are far too valuable to me to be sacrificed to such trivialities. There's a chance I can save you, if you follow my instructions exactly."

"How do I know you're—"

"You don't. But do you trust the Bishop of Custom more?"

Raoul took a deep breath and looked into the hard, blue eyes of the old man. "No," he admitted.

"Good. Now the drug won't begin to work for thirty hours or more. There is an antidote, but it requires preparation and the ordeal is not pleasant. When you leave the city, take the south road to Weetil; then go east to the coast. You will come to a small, yellow villa on the shore. Fear nothing; the people there are entirely loyal to me. Wait at the villa for me."

Without lingering for an answer, the old man turned and Raoul rode out of the city. With no hesitation, he took the broad, white road to the south.

Beyond the city, the countryside was a checkerboard of rolling, fertile farmland, worked by the giant machines created by the God of the Plot and Acre.

Village centers were spaced with geometric regularity along the highway; they were clean, neat settlements of apprentice barracks, mating houses, and enormous Storage Temples of the Gods.

For long stretches Raoul rode alone, seeing nothing but well-tilled fields and grazing herds of cattle. Occasionally he passed caravans of horse-drawn vehicles which were hauling the regular shipments of foodstuffs up to the city.

Raoul's people lived in a near-tropical land on the shore of a warm-water sea. To the south and west were the impenetrable forests of the Gods, and to the north the desert wasteland. In spite of a prolific birthrate, the Elimination Ceremony kept the adult population stable. There was no urge to expand, and without it both the forests and the desert remained unexplored.

Running diagonally across the face of the land, from the shore of the sea almost to the outskirts of the city, was the Forbidden Place, a long, narrow, tree-grown gully, perhaps a mile wide. It divided the area into two parts. No man dared enter the Forbidden Place for any purpose. Its terrors were vague and nameless—and therefore all the more terrifying. For any man or woman who broke the taboo,

the punishment of the Gods was swift and merciless. Even the Noncons, Raoul had heard, avoided it, although they defied the Gods.

Raoul lunched in the village of Weetil and exchanged his mount for a fresh one. The road east to the sea skirted close to the Forbidden Place. Raoul could see the tangled mass of shrubs and trees choking the gully. Brilliantly plumed birds sang on gnarled branches; clouds of insects danced in the air. The wind that swept from the Forbidden Place was cool and sweet, damp with the scent of the sea.

From the crest of a knoll Raoul saw the glittering blue of the ocean, and the curve of the beach. To his left was the yellow villa, built close to the Forbidden Place and facing the sea.

Three horsemen and a wagon were waiting at the side of the road, beneath the brow of the hill. When they saw Raoul, they moved toward him. Although the day was hot, they wore their brown robes wrapped tight around them, and their faces were partly hidden by hoods. The leader saluted him.

"Your name is Raoul?"

"Yes, Raoul IV, of the Order of the Glowing Lamp."

"Then we've found you! Mina will be pleased."

"She sent you?"

"The gateman in the city is a good friend for us to have. As soon as we knew you had ridden south, Mina stationed groups of us on all the side roads. She knew you would have to turn off somewhere. But we can talk later. Get in the wagon; we'll cover you with the empty sacks so you'll not be seen."

"No; I must go to the villa."

A hand shot out and closed over Raoul's wrist. As the brown robe parted, he saw that he was talking to a woman.

"I said you would get into the wagon, Raoul."

"But you don't understand! The Bishop has given me—"

"I have my orders. You are to come with us, one way or the other. Unfortunately, it seems to be the other." She gestured with a curt nod of her head, and her companions closed around Raoul. He was taken entirely off guard. A noose slid over his arms, pinioning them, and another bound an efficient gag into his mouth. They jerked him from his horse and threw him into the wagon, piling the sacks above him. The woman leaned over to thrust wadded cotton beneath his back.

"It may make you more comfortable," she explained. "We have a long ride north. There's little danger that the Order of

Justice would stop us for questioning, but it seems wiser to keep you concealed."

The swaying jolting of the wagon began, then, and continued without pause for endless hours. Raoul was conscious that darkness fell only because the intolerable heat lessened slightly. He could not move. His body was wet with sweat and streaked with the sifted filth from the sacks covering him. Gradually every muscle began to quiver with exhaustion; yet still the monotonous jolting continued.

It was after dawn the next morning when the wagon finally came to a stop. The stinking bags were pulled away, and the ropes that bound Raoul were cut. Two women pulled him to his feet. As he stood up, pain stabbed through his legs in sheets of fire. For a moment he was vaguely conscious of many people crowding around him in a tree-lined clearing. Then he swayed and fell and lost consciousness.

When he awoke he was lying comfortably in a sunny room. Mina sat on the bed beside him, patiently kneading the tense muscles in his arms. She smiled and bent over his lips to kiss him.

"I'm sorry we had to bring you here like this," she said;

"but it was better this way than not at all."

"You shouldn't have done it, Mina!"

"Why not? Because you still think you're not a Noncon?"

"That doesn't matter. The old man said—"

"You made me an offer, Raoul. When you helped us get away, I decided to take you up on it." She stood up, swirling her robe in the air so he could see it. "I'm wearing your cloak, Raoul; and this is our Noncon mating house." She strode to the window, drawing aside the flowered curtain so he could see the rows of houses and the crowded village street. "There are more than a thousand of us here now, and we're growing every day. We're almost ready to take over the city itself. Then we'll be staging a few Processions of our own."

"Mina, please! Listen to me. You can't let me stay here. I've been drugged and I'll betray you all."

She turned and stared at him, the pleasure draining slowly from her face. "No, Raoul; no!"

"The old man said he knew an antidote, but it's too late for that."

"What old man?"

Raoul told her his story. While he talked, Mina sat on the bed beside him, holding his hand and

biting her lip nervously. When he had finished, she said very deliberately,

"There might be a drug like that; I doubt it. But it can't work now, because you know what it will do. No man can be forced to do anything against his will!"

"That's female nonsense, Mina, and you know it. No man is free to act according to his own will; the Gods rule our lives."

"And that's male nonsense, Raoul; only you don't know it—yet." She squared her shoulders. "There are no Gods. It's a fairy story, all of it. We are destroying ourselves with a foolish delusion."

"Of course."

Her voice sank to a whisper. "You know? You've been to the Forbidden Place?"

"No."

"Then how can you—" She snatched his hand with trembling fingers. "Would you be afraid to go there? Answer me truly!"

"I don't know. I don't feel about it now the way I used to."

"Have you rested enough to get up, Raoul? Try, Please!"

He swung out of the bed. The ghost of fatigue still lingered in his muscles, but it had become bearable. She took his arm and they went out into the

street, walking toward a hill at the edge of the village. The town hummed with activity. Raoul saw robes of nearly every Order. The only real difference between the Noncon village and any orthodox town in the land was that the women, as well as the men, were doing the service tasks to honor the Gods.

It struck Raoul as odd to see women running machines, stringing electric wires, cleaning the streets, building new structures. Yet, why shouldn't they? Was this, then, the only heresy of the Noncon? Was this the only reason why frightened wretches were hauled in Procession through the city streets and slain at the Sacred Pedestal?

Mina replied evasively when he asked her about it. "We want equality for men and women in all things," she said. But when they were on the outskirts of the town, out of earshot of the working villagers, she added.

"It's not what I wanted, Raoul; but our people can't seem to work in any other way. Without the Orders, they're simply lost and aimless. I don't understand it."

"If Noncons do take over the city, I don't see that much will be changed."

"It must, Raoul! When we win, they'll be different; they'll have to be."

Raoul stopped suddenly, grinding his clenched fists against his ears. He knew that Mina was still talking, but he could no longer make sense of what she said. His mind clouded over with a violent, insatiable desire to run, which quickly pinpointed itself in an almost verbal order to go back to the city. It was a sensation compounded of blinding horror and nausea. He knew instinctively that he would have no relief from it until he obeyed.

But he knew something else. too: this was the effect of the hypnotic drug. If he gave in to it, it would mean destruction, not relief. Frantically he repeated that one fact over and over. He had a curious sense of madness, as if his brain were being torn in two, but his will gradually asserted itself. The slashing onslaught of emotion diminished, although it held fast in the back of his mind as a tenuous, unreasoned desire.

He became aware of Mina standing in front of him, peering anxiously into his eyes. "What happened?" she demanded.

"The drug." He was panting. "It's started to work."

She held him close. He felt the pounding of her heart against his naked chest. "Don't give in, Raoul; you can't!"

"I didn't, Mina."

"It's over? Then you've beaten it, Raoul!"

"This time. I'm not sure I can if it happens again."

"You will—because you must."

Together they walked to the top of the hill. The Noncon village lay in the valley behind them; close on the left was the rim of the Forbidden Place. Raoul was surprised to see the silhouette of the city in the distance, and the north highway winding close to the foot of the hill.

"Now you know the secret of our hiding place," Mina told him. "We live within sight of the city, but our crimes are all committed in the far north, so the Order of Justice looks for us there."

"Just how much damage have your people done, Mina?"

"Literally nothing. But from the point of view of the Gods, a great deal, I suppose. Our purpose is to win converts. We enter a village in small groups. As the days pass we approach the people—chiefly the women—with hints and suggestions and arguments. The ones we win over join us, frequently bringing their mates here with them. The idea of equality among men and women has a strong appeal."

"What becomes of the ones you don't convert?"

"We do them no physical harm. But somehow the idea of our disobedience—even when they refuse to take part—seems to terrify them. They're the ones who have become refugees in the city. They're not running away from any real danger, but from the unmentionable longing of their own minds. They want to join us, too, but they don't have the courage." She turned away from him, combing the soft grass with the toe of her boot.

"Some of the others aren't so fortunate," she went on. "They convince themselves when it's too late, after we've gone. They can't find us again. They can only talk and try to convince others. Sooner or later, they fall into the hands of the Order of Justice. After treatment in the Court of New Understanding, they star in one of your city Processions. We're trying to work out a way to rescue them. That's why I was there to see the ceremony the afternoon you and I met."

She pursed her lips and frowned. "The Noncon movement is making headway, Raoul; we're really strong enough to take over the city now, but I'm holding them back, because something has gone wrong. It

isn't the kind of revolt I planned. We say we want to make ourselves free, yet bit by bit we've taken over all the old nonsense and the stories about the Gods. The Noncons use the same old machines they've always had, because they say the Gods gave them to us. But if I try to show them a new idea, a new machine, they—they—Oh, I don't know! My own people seem afraid of me!"

"And there are so many beautiful things they could make," he said dreamily. "The other night, when I was looking for you—"

"Oh, Raoul! You've thought of it, too!" Her voice broke and tears gleamed in her eyes. "And you say it so matter-of-factly; you're not afraid." She choked back her excitement. "Will you go into the Forbidden Place with me, Raoul? None of my own people will. When I ask them, they make the sacred circle in the air and run away."

He glanced toward the tangle of trees. For a moment he felt the terrified aversion of the place that he had always been taught. But his reason demanded names for the specific things he feared, and he knew there were none. He said,

"All right, Mina; let's go."

Mina pushed aside the chok-

ing brambles and beyond them Raoul saw a kind of path weaving into the trees. As he followed her, his blood pounded sickeningly; but when none of the anticipated horrors materialized, his tension slowly spent itself. Then, suddenly and without warning, the intense urge to run seized his mind again. He had expected the second attack of the drug to be stronger than the first; surprisingly, it was not. It was over in a matter of seconds. Mina noticed nothing.

"I cut this path myself," she explained, "after I found—"

"Found what?" he asked when she hesitated.

"I don't have a name for it, Raoul. You'll see for yourself in a few minutes. Off and on I have explored the Forbidden Place for years, but I found—it—only two years ago. The first time I came here I was a little girl, not more than twelve."

"And you weren't afraid?"

She laughed. "I never learned I was supposed to be."

"Didn't your teacher in the Dedication House read to you from the Temple Book?"

She stopped in the path and looked squarely at him. The unfathomable depths of her eyes blazed. "I have never told anyone else, Raoul. I think you can stand the truth." She took a deep breath. "I wasn't born in

the Dedication House. My own father brought me up."

He felt a bitter shock of revulsion. He had actually kissed her lips and touched her hand; he had asked her to become his mate! And now she was quietly admitting to the foulest kind of filth. She was entirely lost to the Gods, neither human nor animal, forever unclean because she was undedicated. Her name was not inscribed in the Mystic Book; she had no guardian God who could hear her prayers; she would sully everything she touched and the taint would be passed on to her children and her children's children, for all eternity.

"My parents were serving the Order of the Plow and Acre. They had a lonely wheat station in the north. I came before my time, and my mother hadn't made arrangements in the Dedication House in the village; so I was born at the farm. Only father was there to help, and mother died. He loved her so that he never took another mate, and he blamed the Gods for her death, because he had always rendered proper service and said the correct prayers and obeyed the omens. In his grief he doubted them, and he decided to make me a sort of test of the Gods. He gave me the regulation ceremony of Dedication himself, so

that my name would be written in the Mystic Book; but he taught me nothing about the Gods. If they were all-powerful, he reasoned, the Gods would themselves instruct me in their ways. I grew up on lonely, out-of-the-way farms, Raoul; I seldom saw any man except my father; I was never inside a Temple. When father found that the Gods had taught me nothing, it convinced him. He spent the rest of his life hammering a single idea into my head: I was to trust in nothing, believe in nothing, that I could not prove for myself. Is it any wonder that I became a Noncon before I was fifteen?"

As she talked, Raoul's aversion withered before the erosion of reason. He knew her as she was. How could a Temple ceremony make her either clean or foul? Suddenly and savagely he pulled her into his arms, grinding his lips against the pulsing liquid of her mouth. Her eyes were bright with the ecstasy of her triumph, and in the gentle peace of the Forbidden Place she yielded her flame of passion to his.

Later, she led him to the end of the path she had cut. Raoul saw a gigantic metal cylinder lying on the ground, so large he could not see the end of it, lost among the trees. Vines and moss

grew over it and jagged pieces of metal had corroded away.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Perhaps you will know when I show you the things inside."

She took him through a gap in the metal. He found himself in a vast, cylindrical room. Rusted, moss-covered machinery loomed in the semi-darkness. Small animals scurried over the damp floor as Raoul and Mina approached. A nesting bird in one corner cawed protectively over its trio of eggs. Mina stopped in front of a door.

"Can you open it, Raoul?" Her voice bubbled with hidden pleasure. Vainly he twisted the confusion of rusted wheels and dials.

"For more than a year I got no farther than this," Mina admitted. "The secret is in fixing the wheels in a certain way." She showed him how it was done. "Then you push this little lever—so. And the door comes open."

They stood back while the thick, intricately tooled metal rectangle swung toward them. The air smelled musty and stale and dry. Mina knelt and pulled the cord of a small, oil-burning motor. Light came on, revealing a long, cluttered chamber.

"I brought a farm power unit and generator here," Mina explained, "and put up the lights."

They went through the door. "This is an inner chamber, Raoul. It's still exactly as it was when it first came here. The door sealed it fast until I learned how to open it, and the wall has not corroded through because at this point the metal is three layers thick."

Although he wanted to linger over the enticing array of strange machines that lined the walls, Mina led him instead to the far end of the chamber, where a complex panel of dials stood beneath a broad, green-tinted, glass screen. Mina pointed at an ornate ceiling decoration above the screen. Raoul saw a meaningless pattern of circles drawn against a field of faded black, but scattered among them were stylized symbols that he knew: the familiar sign of the sun, always worn by the Order of the Glowing Lamp.

"But this shows fifteen suns in the sky!" he cried.

Mina pulled open a drawer and threw a sheaf of yellowed paper on the panel before him, turning the sheets so that he could see each one. On every page was a drawing similar to the ceiling design, except that elliptical lines joined various of the spheres, and the number of suns was uncountable. Printed symbols on the paper suggested that it was a chart of the sky, on which

routes of travel had been designated.

Raoul's mind reeled. His world was falling apart. For a moment he thought he was losing his mind. Two nights ago he had felt defiantly courageous to wonder if the Gods actually lighted night Lamps in the crystal globe of the sky; now he was doubting the existence of the crystal itself.

Even as he struggled to hold to the old concepts, an unanswered question that had always nagged at his reason mocked him still. If the sun, in truth, rode across the sky on a sphere of crystal, how did it return to its starting point each morning? Only once had he asked the question, when he was a very young child, and Pere Marin had replied with a painful lashing in order to drive the Noncon heresy out of his mind. But the beating had answered nothing; it had only taught Raoul not to ask the question again.

"It's harder for you," Mina said, "because you've learned all the ways of the Gods. But consider the ceiling drawing and the charts. Then answer me truthfully: what is this thing hidden here in the Forbidden Place?"

"A—a metal machine," he said weakly.

"But a machine has a use. How did this come to be here?"

"It was—it was driven here from a place in the sky, from another sun."

"Not another sun, Raoul. We do not live on our sun; we merely enjoy its heat and light."

He choked and glanced up at the ceiling painting. He had a feeling of lonely vastness, of horizons receding eternally, of terrible instability and insignificance.

"The important thing is this, Raoul: this traveling machine came here from another place. It brought machines we have never seen before, and—and men. Because it is here, this is called the Forbidden Place. We are not meant to find it. Why? Is it because it brought our own people to this world many centuries ago? Were we exiles? Were we pioneers?"

"No, that isn't why it's forbidden," he replied with some assurance, "but because of the machines. We are allowed just so many; we dare not make others. If we did, the Gods would be overthrown. Man would be free to rule his own destiny." He began to pace the floor, rubbing his hands with excitement. "We must tell the truth, Mina; we must set our people free to think for themselves!"

"I've tried, Raoul, and even the Noncons will not believe."

"Any man will believe what he can see for himself. We must learn all there is to know here, and then show our people—show them things and facts. It will be so easy."

Mina frowned uncertainly, but she said nothing.

Raoul spent the rest of the day in the chamber of the metal cylinder. Mina showed him the machines she already understood. His degree of comprehension outstripped hers almost at once, for Raoul had been apprenticed to the Order of the Glow-ing Lamp. He found very little that was totally new to deal with, but rather a different application of familiar principles. The first genuinely puzzling machine that he discovered was a short, metal-handled cylinder he took out of an old chest. Beneath the cylinder was a short, curved lever protected by a narrow, metal guard. The lever obviously made the machine perform, but the purpose of the device eluded him, for when he pulled on the lever the machine merely clicked as if a spring had been suddenly released.

He was more interested in an apparatus that Mina called a talking machine. It was a fascinating new application of electronic tubes, for when she

threaded a brown tape between spools and plugged the machine into her power outlet, the tape produced a gibberish that was obviously speech, although neither of them understood it.

"It didn't work at first," Mina explained, "until I brought tubes from the village to replace the old ones."

"And they fit exactly?"

"Yes; I knew where to put them because the markings on our tubes were the same as the markings on theirs. Oh, Raoul, if we only knew what the voice on the tape is saying, we could learn so much!"

"If the electronic tubes are identical, we're the same people, Mina. Our language must have changed, even though our machines have not." He listened to the voice intently, as if concentration could pierce the linguistic evolution of decades. Suddenly he stopped the tape and ran a segment through the player again, more slowly. The sound of a word had become unmistakably familiar. On the second run he identified it as "Zynetiss."

"The machine may simply work on a different cycle," he said hopefully. "We might understand if I could slow down the speed of the motor." He carefully removed the front panel and examined the tubes and colored wires. The appara-

tus was annoyingly in the shadow. He tried to move it closer to the light, but it was fastened firmly to a metal cabinet welded to the floor.

Raoul opened the cabinet. Its shelves were stacked with tapes like the one on the machine. He took them out so that he could inspect the roof of the cabinet. He ran his fingers along the metal, into the dark interior. He felt a small rectangle. It came free in his hand.

Mina bent over his shoulder and they looked at a slim, fragile book. They were speechless and a little breathless, for they knew they had found the key to the strange tongue. The book contained lists of curious symbols that were obviously word forms. Beside each was a pictograph depicting meaning. Verbal action was conveyed in a series of drawings. And fastened to the page, next to each word symbol, was a piece of the talking tape.

It was their greatest discovery, for it unlocked a new world.

For a week they came back to the Forbidden Place each day, and spent hours memorizing the sound and sight of the strange language. At intervals, particularly at night, Raoul had occasional moments when the desire to return to the city blazed high in his mind, but the sensation

passed quickly and each recurrence seemed weaker than any that had preceded it. After the fourth day the effect of the drug had passed entirely.

The business of learning the word symbols was more difficult than it had seemed at first. At the back of the vocabulary book were graduated exercises in the use of the symbols, which conveyed additional and abstract meanings for each of the words. These, too, had to be learned and Raoul and Mina found they had to relieve the grind periodically, or lose all the ground they had gained.

Raoul relaxed by building an improved lighting system, with equipment brought in from the village. He erected a shelter where they could stay at night in the Forbidden Place. Mina found food sources among the trees—wild berries, vegetables, birds' eggs. They even managed to trap and kill two forest animals.

At intervals Raoul experimented with other machines until he understood the function of most of them. There were numerous gauges and measuring instruments which apparently had checked the position of the traveling machine while it was in flight. There were devices that converted the

sun's rays into long bars of variously colored light and cast the bars against graded scales. There were cabinets of bottled chemicals, and cabinets of books which Raoul determined to read as soon as he knew the language. The thing that gave him the greatest delight, however, was the discovery of two very small machines which used electronic waves to transmit the human voice great distances through the air. Either machine could receive from the other or transmit to it. Raoul gave one to Mina and kept the second for himself, its compact body fastened within the band of his shorts and the tiny sending disk bound to his belt.

Whenever they wandered apart in the woods, they could still talk back and forth. Even when Mina found it necessary to stay in the village because the Noncons were beginning to protest her long absences, she still kept in close touch with Raoul.

The last machine he mastered was the metal-handled cylinder that had puzzled him before. In a sealed box he found a number of tiny, glistening, metal tubes. They fit exactly into chambers at the back of the cylinder. He filled the empty slots and then examined the device again. It was probably a form of weapon. The released spring would throw

the metal tubes through the cylinder. No doubt, if an enemy were close enough, the impact of the metal might stun him, but Raoul doubted that it was as deadly as the Sacred Weapon used by the Order of Justice. That functioned on the same spring principle, but it shot six tiny, poison-tipped darts sometimes as far as fifty feet. Even a scratch from one dart was fatal.

Yet, because he could not estimate the full strength of the foreign spring, he took the precaution of carrying it outside before he pulled the releasing lever. Mina was lying on the grass in the sun, studying her vocabulary book.

"I think I understand what this is, now," he told her.

"I hope it's as wonderful as the back-and-forth talkers you found," she said. Languidly she closed her book and lay back on the grass. "Come sit by me, Raoul, and show me how it works."

He dropped on the grass; she pulled him close, running her fingers softly along his ribs.

"I'm sure it's a weapon," he said, determinedly ignoring her caress. "It may even be strong enough to hit that tree trunk over there."

"It must have a greater range than that, Raoul! There's a bird

on the branch; see if you can hit it."

"Not even a Sacred Weapon—"

He aimed the cylinder carefully and pulled the lever. His arm shook with the impact of the explosion, and the bird fell dead. He lowered the device slowly. They both stared at it as it lay in the palm of his hand.

"Such a small thing, to do so much," Mina whispered.

"The hand of the Gods. It's in the Temple Book, Mina! *And to save the Chosen, the Gods made another hand, a hollow pointing finger, to write fire and death on the hearts of the Zyne-tiss enemy. But so great and terrible was the destruction, the Gods concealed the knowledge when they gave the Chosen the new place.*"

"Nonsense, Raoul." Mina got up, sweeping her hair back into a loose knot. "I have to go back to the village tonight. You want to stay here again, I suppose?"

"Yes. I want to try to read one of the tapes again."

"I thought so. I fixed some cold fruit and meat for you. I'll come back as soon as I can."

When Raoul was alone he examined the weapon again. He began to understand its value, although the secondary idea forming in his mind was still

too vague for him to verbalize consciously. He took a handful of the tiny tubes and walked some distance away from the traveling machine. There he loaded and fired the weapon until he had not only conquered his fear of it, but was also able to hit a target of his choice.

That evening, while he ate, he read the vocabulary book again; when he played the tape pieces through the talking machine he suddenly seemed to understand them without awkwardness, like words of his own. He had reached a plateau of learning where the new symbols had become workable.

Excitedly he fed a tape into the machine. At first, he was disappointed. As before, he recognized an isolated word here and there, but the flow of meaning escaped him. Yet when he shut his eyes and concentrated with all his mind, the association of pictograph and sound began to coincide.

Abruptly he comprehended.

The tape wound to its end; he played it through again, and put on another. Throughout the night he listened to the story of his own people, and to the contrasting record of another. He grasped it all in terms of the strange language; but his mind ached with the strain of translating the facts into concepts of

his own world. There was so much of the past he had forgotten, so much of the present he had to wipe out!

In the beginning, in a disordered world, the voice told him, man's ability to make machines outstripped his ability to control them. The machines were used in great conflicts; and each conflict was more terrible than the one that had come before it. Timid men blamed the machines for their trouble, rather than themselves; and in time they blamed the inventors, the men they called Zynetiss. A leader emerged, and the timid flocked to join him. He was a dreamer, a lover of justice, a sincere man terribly tormented by the turmoil of mankind. He thought he knew a solution.

First, the invention of new machines had to be controlled. Tests were made to establish the value of new ideas; the ones that failed to meet the established standards were prohibited. Machines already made were judged, and those considered harmful to man were destroyed. The Zynetiss protested. An idea based on truth, they said, should never be discarded, regardless of the consequences; this they called the Law of the Zynetiss. They tried to persuade the people, and a new conflict began; as a result, the Zynetiss were out-

lawed. Many were slain; the rest vanished.

Yet still the people were tortured with doubts and frustrations; still the world knew no peace. The leader, who called himself the Tester, thought the cause of the disorder must be located in the spirit of man himself. Those who were happiest were those who conformed most readily to the tried and established ways. A stable society seemed to be the final answer. The Tester went about setting it up, but it was not finished for many generations. Gradually all of the major institutions of man were telescoped into one which was called Service to Society. Men were divided into classes, according to their abilities. To establish complete uniformity, the custom of marriage was abandoned. All children were, at birth, absorbed into one uniform environment, which would shape them identically. The principle of the Test was applied to the people themselves. Those who conformed to the norm were allowed to survive; the rest were destroyed. Eventually the service classes were corrupted into Orders, and the service was rendered to invented Gods. But the basic principle remained. The stable society had been created; men were happy; they lived and died in ruts.

One tape told the bitter story of Raoul's people. The rest—more than two hundred reels—objectively listed the knowledge of another world, symbolized by the devices and books Raoul found in the traveling machine. The patient, persuasive voice on the tape invited the listener to judge between the two, and to make a choice for himself.

Before the night was over, Raoul knew what he had to do. The truth had freed him; it could free others. Instead of living eternally walled in by custom and taboo, his people would be able to lift up their horizons to the stars.

He knew he would be taking a chance; but he was confident that, if he could be heard, he would succeed. If he could be heard! In that instant, the whole plan fell into place.

He removed the element from the talking machine which made the voice audible; after a little experiment, he made an adaptation of the instrument and wired it into the back-and-forth talking machine that he wore. When he tried out the results, he found his voice would boom like thunder over the empty forest.

Since it was also conceivable that he might fail, he took the metal weapon with him and a carton of the explosive tubes.

Shortly after dawn he called

Mina on the back-and-forth talking machine.

"I'm going to the city," he told her bluntly.

"No, Raoul. It's the drug! Wait till I come, Raoul; give me a chance to show you what's happened!"

"It isn't the drug, Mina, I've made up my own mind."

"It only seems that you have, Raoul. You're tired and—"

"Yes, I'm tired, but I know the whole truth. I've heard almost all the tapes, Mina. You were right, I think. Long ago, our people came here in that traveling machine, from another world. We've forgotten so much, and tied ourselves down with so much—"

"Yes, Raoul; but you can't go to the city and tell them that."

"There's one place I can go where they'll hear me."

"The Sacred Pedestal!" She screamed, but he snapped off the machine so he would not hear it.

He set out at once because he knew Mina would try to stop him if he lingered in the Forbidden Place. His plan was simple. He intended to hide among the city crowds until the Order of Justice staged another Procession. If there were none today, there would surely be one tomorrow. As the victim was

dragged toward the Sacred Pedestal, Raoul would use the amplification of his voice to attract the attention of the mob and quiet the shouting. Then he would mount the Pedestal himself and start talking to them.

The only real danger, he thought, would arise if he could not silence the crowd. He still thought escape would be possible, because they had no weapon to equal his.

Ironically, it was the very efficiency of Mina's organization that trapped him.

Until he approached the city gate, he had forgotten that the gateman was a friend to the Noncons. The attendant who had sent word to Mina that he had escaped from the city now tried to keep him from entering it. Raoul bluffed and to an extent he succeeded, for the gateman shrugged and let him pass. But the bluff had attracted attention. A block inside the city three novices of the Order of Justice stopped Raoul; a curious crowd formed quickly.

Even then Raoul knew he could have escaped by using his weapon, but that would mean giving up his chance to speak the truth. He tried deception, and he was lost. The three men seemed to accept the story he gave them. They smiled; they exuded complacency; they apolo-

gized. As Raoul relaxed and walked away, the blow struck his head. . . .

He regained consciousness in a vast, smoke-filled room. Scarlet hangings covered the walls, and the only light came from the scarlet fire burning in eight braziers. The air throbbed with pounding drums and, as Raoul struggled to his feet, a band of naked men, painted red and wearing the grinning masks of Justice, sprang up around him. Gyrrating wildly and screaming with fury, they swung around him in a circle, occasionally dancing close to slap at his legs with knife-sharp metal thongs.

This, Raoul knew, was the beginning of the Ceremony of New Understanding. The dancing novices of the Order of Justice would lash him until his flesh was torn in ribbons, or until he cried out an admission of his guilt. In his case, he knew, admission had to be more than a mere formality; he was expected to tell them the location of the Noncon stronghold.

The mounting fire of pain ate at Raoul's legs. He was naked and helpless. Not twenty feet away, just beyond the circle of the dancers, lay his clothes, his priceless weapon and his back-and-forth talking box.

A low door opened and a high priest scurried into the room.

He whispered orders to the dancers, and slowly the frantic ceremony came to a halt. The high priest turned to Raoul.

"The Bishop orders your presence."

Four of the dancers formed a sweating, panting cordon around Raoul and pushed him toward the door. A fifth picked up his clothing. Raoul's heart leaped with hope; if once they returned to him, he could escape.

Raoul was taken into a tiny, gaudily scarlet room, where the Bishop of Custom sat on his throne, his hands clasped so tightly that the knuckles were white.

"I sent you on a mission," he said in his shrill voice. "Have you brought me the information?"

"No."

The Bishop sprang up and lashed him across the face with a jewel-studded band of leather. Raoul reeled. "You're lying!" the Bishop screamed.

"The truth?" Raoul almost laughed with hysteria. "Would you know it if I told you? Can you understand that everything you believe in is an illusion? We invented our Gods and we hide behind them because we're afraid. I've learned that much for you."

"The leather slashed Raoul's

face again, and the Bishop sprang at him, but a high priest intervened. He whispered quickly to the Bishop, and the thin man slowly subsided on his throne. He spoke with a semblance of dignity.

"Who gave you the antidote, Raoul?" When Raoul did not reply, the Bishop's voice rose higher. "We administered an hypnotic drug when you left here. If it had taken effect, you would have told us everything long before this. Only continuous, forced body sweating, maintained over a long period and started within ten hours of the time the drug is given, will counteract it." The high voice sank to a purring whisper. "But not five men in the city know that, Raoul. If you will publicly tell the name of the man who helped you, I'll give you your freedom." He waited. "Tell me!" he screamed. As he rose to lash Raoul again, the high priest again came between them. The Bishop stood by his throne, rigid and trembling.

"In time," he said, "the Order of Justice could have made you confess. However, you seem to have attracted attention—elsewhere. I am ordered by the Gods to hold you without harm in a cell. I have no other choice. If I had known of your influence, I would have ordered you

into Procession immediately; nothing could have countermanded that order, but now—now—"The Bishop shrugged. "The Gods must be served." To the high priest he said, "Give him his clothes."

The Bishop sat in brooding silence while Raoul pulled on his golden shorts and his soiled robe. Raoul felt the wiring of the back-and-forth talking machine; everything was intact. His weapon and his box of explosive tubes had not been tampered with. He smiled with new assurance; if he chose, he could walk out of the Court of New Understanding whenever he chose and no man could stop him.

"If I had known," the Bishop mused thoughtfully, "that you were to be taken from my jurisdiction, you would be in Procession now, in place of the poor fool we're just sending out. Nothing could have changed the final sentence, I speak with the tongue of the God of Custom. Now suppose, Raoul, that I had given the order first—" Slowly the Bishop began to smile. He whispered to the high priest, and the high priest smiled, too. "Take him away," the Bishop ordered.

Raoul knew what they intended to do. It was, however, the thing he wanted. If he could

speak to the people from the Sacred Pedestal, even as a prisoner, the whole fabric of falsehood could be destroyed.

He saw that he still had a chance to escape when they brought him to the door of the Court. The crowds lapped up around the prisoner's litter, screaming their anger; but Raoul knew his weapon could clear a way even through the mob. Nonetheless, the chance to tell them the truth seemed more important than his own safety.

He allowed the high priest to shove him into the cage.

The Procession moved toward the Temple of the Tester. The fury of the mob ascended in its familiar pattern, the pounding of the drums beating the rising tempo.

Then Raoul saw Mina. She was crowding close to the curb, and a group of her stalwart women were clustered behind her. She began to move forward; he shook his head sharply and, to reassure her, gestured towards his weapon. She seemed willing to wait, yet she pushed along the fringe of the crowd, following the litter.

Raoul was jerked out at the foot of the Sacred Pedestal. He mounted the steps, erect and proud, fingering the speaking disk of his back-and-forth talking machine and moving it

stealthily to his lips. He came abreast of the Tester. And he stopped, his nerves pounding, his breath coming fast.

For the Tester was the white haired old man who had attempted to help Raoul escape from the city.

The old man, for his part, was equally shocked. He staggered and caught at his lip in fear. "I told them to hold you," he muttered. "I gave the order! Now there's nothing else, Raoul. I have to go through with it. The Bishop of Custom is forcing my hand. I did my best to save you. Now—now everything's lost." The old man was weeping as he moved toward Raoul, holding out the death wires.

Raoul whirled and began to speak. "Listen to me! Listen to me!" The words roared out over the shouting mob, but no one seemed to heed him. "I come to tell you the truth. I have been to the Forbidden Place. Let me tell you what I have learned."

The shouting continued. But the Bishops, standing at the foot of the Pedestal, had heard. For a moment they seemed bewildered at the volume of Raoul's voice; then they sprang at him. Raoul drew his weapon and fired. The Bishop of Custom lay dead, his blood spilling out over his scarlet robe. The others paused and pulled back.

The mob became still. Even the Tester was waiting.

Raoul began to talk; he had his audience at last. He spoke simply. He told them of the stars and of the endless infinity of the heavens, and he told them of the metal cylinder lying in the Forbidden Place. When he paused there was no sound, no motion in the throng.

Sweat broke out on Raoul's forehead. He saw no understanding, no comprehension in the sea of blank faces. Only Mina, crowding close to the foot of the Pedestal, seemed to hear him.

He beckoned to her to join him. If they heard her repeat the same thing, perhaps the mob would understand. But as she moved up the stone steps, the spell began to break. A high priest darted from the shadows and tried to slip a noose over Raoul's arms. Raoul turned and used his weapon again. The high priest fell with a scream, tumbling slowly down the long flight of steps.

The crowd started to shout again. "The hand of the Gods! The hand of the Gods!" They pushed close to the Pedestal, frantically making the sacred circle sign in the air. Mina was beside Raoul, and he put his arm around her as he tried to talk again.

"You must understand!" he

cried into the speaking disk. "This has nothing to do with the Gods; my weapon is a machine made by men. I can make it; you can make it for yourselves."

"The Gods return from the Forbidden Place!"

"See me with your eyes, as I am," Raoul pleaded. "I am no God, but a man like yourselves."

"The Gods live again among us, to reward our purity!"

The chant rose high, and the drums began to beat. The Bishop of Invisible Powers prostrated himself at Raoul's feet, softly touching the soiled, golden shoes.

"The God returns in the robe of my Order," he whispered.

"No! No! You must hear the truth!" Raoul screamed, but even the full amplification of his voice was drowned by the chanting. The crowd was forming into sacred circles before the Pedestal, and the dance of festivity had begun.

The Tester took Raoul's arm and drew him back. "I could have told you this would happen." There was the trace of a smile on his lips, but it was a bitter smile. "You might as well come into the Temple; they'll expect that. Bring her, if you like."

The Tester led Raoul and Mina into the cube-shaped build-

ing, and the thanksgiving of the mob shrilled up to a frenzied climax. As the metal doors clanged shut, the noise was blotted out. Mina and Raoul stood alone in a vast, columned, marble hall, facing the white-robed Tester.

"What happened?" Raoul cried. "Why won't they listen to me?"

"Has this woman been with you in the Forbidden Place?" the Tester asked, ignoring his question.

"Of course," Mina said calmly. "I took him there."

"You have seen the machine?"

"Yes, and Raoul has read the tapes."

"Then you know where it came from?"

"No," Mina admitted. "We've guessed it was the traveling machine that brought our people here many centuries ago."

"Sound reasoning," the Tester said; "but entirely wrong. We weren't brought here, woman; we have always been here. This is our world, or what's left of it."

"Then what is the traveling machine?" Raoul asked. "Where did it come from?"

"When we had our last upheaval, it was a war between the timid conformists and the Zynetiss; the conformists won, but the Zynetiss had the techniques

to escape altogether. They went to another planet and, I presume, they set up a superior civilization there; later they took compassion on us and sent that machine back, with samples of their inventions and a record of their knowledge."

"You know all this as true?"

"It is in the Sacred Temple Records. The machine fell here four centuries ago. The decision of the Bishops at that time was to isolate it forever, because we had become a stable society and the new machines would only provoke new disorders. The Forbidden Place was created, and the machine has lain there since."

"But our people are wrong," Raoul persisted doggedly. "We have isolated ourselves in a prison of our own making."

"True, but we deserve it because we chose it with our eyes open. Our mob, now, will never be any different. We have at last bred the dominant traits of conformity, by killing off the deviants."

"Now I know what seemed so strange about the Noncons," Mina intervened thoughtfully.

"The idea of equality between men and women appealed to them, because it signified an even greater conformity; it would wipe out the one remaining difference among our peo-

ple. They weren't revolting, as I thought; they were simply conforming."

"And the Bishops were opposed," the Tester added, "because it was a violation of established custom. With each generation our people have become more and more identical—and less and less human. No one can explain the truth to them, now; they are literally unable to comprehend it."

"But I understood it," Raoul said stubbornly.

"Because, Raoul, you aren't just a variant, but a mutation—like myself, I think. You have the old qualities that once distinguished a man from the animals: you can reason and think independently and make new decisions. Since I became Tester I have studied every Test administered, looking for evidence that might point to a man among us. Superior ability wasn't enough; what I needed was the thing you did."

"You mean the way I cheated on the Tests?"

"Precisely. You demonstrated intelligence when you were a child; then, when you knew that a superior score meant Elimination, you cheated so you would seem to conform."

"But anyone else would do the same thing; it just happens that

I guessed what was happening."

"When I was young and idealistic, Raoul, I thought that, too. If superior childhood scores turned up, I saw to it that the boys definitely knew what would happen to them if they didn't cheat. It made no difference. They were too afraid. Yet, Raoul, you reached the conclusion of your own volition; and you accepted the consequences of your decision."

"In other words," Raoul said slowly, "I practiced the Law of the Zynetiss. But anyone in the crowd could learn to do that!"

"If they all happened to be mutations—that were men." The Tester sighed. "Well, I found you, Raoul; and somehow I've bungled things so that you've been turned into a God. It's a man I want! A man to breed us a civilization of men!"

"And what of his mate?" Mina asked softly.

"Finding a woman is hopeless," the Tester admitted. "There are never any Classification Tests given to—but you

said you had been to the Forbidden Place!"

"Yes; and Raoul has given me his cloak." Mina slipped her arm through Raoul's. "There must be a way we can get out of the Temple and escape the mob."

"Yes," the Tester said; "there is a passage under the square to the north gate."

"Show us, please. If any of the people ask for their new God, say he has gone back to the Forbidden Place. Anyone who has the courage to follow us there has the mind to join us, too." She smiled into the Tester's tired face. "If the old Zynetiss send another traveling machine here four hundred years from now, there may be some men alive, then, who'll know what to do with it."

"We'll rear our own children," Raoul said, softly caressing Mina's arm, "and we'll teach them to believe in nothing they cannot prove."

Mina's fingers brushed against his lips. "Better still, Raoul," she said. "We'll teach them to believe in themselves."

We're still trying to find whether readers want a letter column, but as yet it's too early to make a final decision. If you are interested, get your vote in at once. And we hope that by the time the next issue is on the stands, we'll know just what you think should be done about this. Watch for the outcome, and help to determine it by your postcards!

KILLER

BY JAMES E. GUNN

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

He came to me from the stars, spewed out from his own world by his hates. I found him, I gave him all he could ask for, and I made him mine. But in the end, there was still his hate, and the killer drive within him. . .

He was a killer. He came to me from a distance so great that it was meaningless. He descended to me riding on a tail of flame. We loved—how could we help it? But I knew him too well, and he did not know me well enough. And that is the stuff of tragedy.

Green, was his first thought, pleased and incredulous. *Beautiful, beautiful green!*

It was implausibility and wonder. It was the impossible happy ending to the long chase and the longer hopelessness. It was the haven after the fleeing into space with metal bloodhounds hot on a trail of fading ions in the empty vaults, after the hurried Jump and the fantastic mechanical failure which turned an alien universe into a

hungry mouth, snapped shut, after the expectoration into sane space like a rejected seed. It began with death and ended with life.

For green is the color of life. Green is the color of growing things, of energy becoming useful, of plants doing the countless things that make life possible for animals. Green is the color of Earth.

Another chance, he thought. *Unless this is dream or delusion or a cosmic jest—another chance. I'm black-and-blue from pinching myself—I don't feel crazy—though after a week Nowhere who can be sure? Unless some vital little thing is out of balance down there—A jewel like that? Twin sister to Earth. Surely fate would not go this far and*

then leave out some little essential . . .

The green world turned lazily in the yellow light of the Go-type sun.

"What are you waiting for, Sam," he said aloud, "an invitation? Kick her down and find out!"

There was only enough fuel for one landing. The Jumper had eaten up a lot when it went crazy, and the yacht had only a quarter fuel load when he took it. It was here or nothing.

I'd rather die with my feet on the ground. If I'm lucky—maybe something alive I can communicate with in time. I thought I'd die in there with no one to talk to. Just to be with something else alive—

And that was rather strange, because it was murder that brought him here.

Sam Newman had been a commercial pilot. It was a good job, but contrary to public opinion pilots are not fabulously overpaid. What with automatics and navigational tapes and such, the skill of the early pilots is no longer essential. The computers do the work, and pilots are mostly supernumeraries. But the glamor has not yet vanished, and competition is keen.

Yet, that Sam had got as far as he had was something of a triumph. His appointment to the

Academy had been due to a political concession which established a quota for poor children. Sam had worked for it, and his eventual position as pilot of a passenger liner was proof of how hard he worked.

Then had come Fran and love—the two together, inseparable. Sam had had a long time to think about it. But still he couldn't decide whether they had really been in love or only in love with the feeling of being in love. What had attracted him to Fran was obvious: her dark-haired beauty, her slim, curved figure, and her casual acceptance of things he had always coveted, like position, security, luxury. For Fran had been wealthy.

What had attracted her to him was, in a sense, the same things. He had been called handsome; he was tall and well-built and blond. He was everything that Fran was not: ambitious, imaginative, intense like the keen, shining edge of a knife.

Differences had attracted them, and differences split them apart when marriage threw them into constant companionship. His pride rebelled at the use of her money, and she could not understand. He was ill-at-ease in her world, and she seemed condescending in his. What had seemed entrancingly different under the silver light of romance



became ugly and irritating under the merciless, glaring sun of living together. And finally came the quarrels and the arguments and the jealousy—on his part, anyway. Fran was casual in other things—why not in morals? God knows, she had opportunity enough when he was away.

And whispers reached his ears and nasty rumors and Fran only shrugged her slim shoulders and looked down at him from an unassailable pinnacle of sophistication. Innocence of inherited position or excuse for license? She was spoiled, he knew, spoiled with liberty that did not understand "I shouldn't."

Then the blind, red day when the crewmen had snickered as he passed on his way down the ramp, when he had learned what everyone seemed to know—that she was divorcing him, when he had faced her with his suspicions and accusations and she had laughed, laughed as his face grew hot and red and heavy and his hands reached for her throat and squeezed, squeezed until the laughter was all gone, and the beauty and the life . . .

He took the yacht down by hand. He did not trust the automatics, and besides, it was the last time, the last trip, and he

wanted to do it himself. The way the ship responded to the light pressure of his fingers on the keys gave him an acute feeling of pleasure. He brought it down only a mile or so from the ocean, where a broad river emptied into it; rivers and seas are natural places of habitation. He brought it down lightly, gently, on its tail absorbers so that the ship hesitated for a moment and then sagged as the power cut off, and everything was quiet. He sat there with his hands on the keys for a moment, and he would have liked to have taken her up again and landed it once more, but the needle of the fuel gauge flickered at empty. There was only enough to provide light and heat for a few months. Fran's yacht had come to her last port.

Sam sighed and lifted his hands from the keys and dropped them into his lap. The hands clutched each other for a moment, and then relaxed. They were good hands for piloting a ship and bad hands for loving. They were killers, but now there was to be no use for either function any more.

Sam got up and walked to the port. He hesitated and then punched the button. There was no use testing the air. If it was poisonous he might as well find it out now; the air regenerators

in the ship would not last long.

The heavy disc swung outward, slowly, with a slight squeal. The air came in. It was warm, fresh with the odor of green, growing things. Sam breathed deeply once and again. It was good air, life-giving air. He let down the ladder and climbed down its tubular metal rungs. He stood on the soil of this alien planet and filled his lungs once more as he looked around.

The grass beneath his feet was short and springy, more like well-cared-for lawn than wild meadow. Here and there flowers sprang up. They seemed familiar, but he was no botanist. The trees nearby—weren't they elms? Overhead the sky was blue, the soft, mild blue of summer, with small, drifting white clouds.

Sam felt strangely uneasy, as if he had walked into a room expecting it to be unfamiliar and found he knew it almost by heart. Parallel evolution? Nowhere had the explorations found anything so much like Earth—or, rather, like Earth should look like. If so, then perhaps there were—men. Sam longed for someone to talk to. Anyone. He shrugged. He had been lucky so far; he should not press it.

He took out a pocket compass.

The needle trembled and then swung into a fixed position. There was his north, and the ocean lay to the east of him, the river to the northeast and farther away. Sam struck out toward the ocean.

There was something wrong. Sam sensed it and then knew it without being able to pin it down. A moment later it came to him. It was so quiet; there was no life, no sound except the lazy rustle of leaves in the light breeze. *There should be birds, he thought, and bees.* A few steps farther on he caught sight of both. *They must have been frightened by the landing of the ship.*

He had been walking among the trees for several minutes. It was easy to keep moving steadily in the direction he had set for himself; the trees were well spaced, and there was no brush or debris of dead leaves and branches—only the crisp green turf beneath his feet. Fragmentary thoughts skipped through his mind.

No signs of inhabitants . . . nothing artificial . . . unless this impossibly perfect turf . . . or the trees . . . Sam had the uneasy feeling that something was watching him—perhaps with an emotion stronger than curiosity. He walked on a few steps and spun around. There was nothing

but the trees and the turf and the birds and the bees. Slowly his hand let the gun slide back into the holster at his hip. *Nerves? But surely there should be some animal life.*

Sam started. He had turned back toward the ocean, and scarcely twenty-five feet away a half-grown fawn, spotted white and brown, lifted its head from the turf it had been cropping daintily. He walked toward it, and the fawn held its ground, looking at him without fear. He put his hand on the fawn's neck, and the fawn nestled toward him and its coat was silky.

Wonderingly, Sam rubbed its neck and shoulders gently, and the fawn looked at him with brown eyes, big and trustful. Sam gave it a final pat and walked on. Behind him the fawn hesitated for a moment and then started to trot along behind.

After a few minutes Sam reached the coast. It was as peaceful and beautiful as a South Sea island. The trees stopped and a little farther on the grass stopped and white sand stretched down to a gently foaming surf and blue water. Sam stood looking at it for a long time, his hand resting on the fawn's head.

He sat down and took off his shoes. He walked through the

warm sand to the edge of the water. He knelt and put his hand into the surf. It was just cool enough to be invigorating. Sam stood up abruptly and sprinted through the surf down the gently shelving beach until the water was deep enough to swim in. It was foolhardy. Even around South Sea islands there are sharks. But somehow Sam couldn't distrust this world. He swam and floated in the water for half an hour. Finally he waded toward the shore again. The fawn was curled up on the sand, sleeping peacefully in the sun beside his pile of discarded clothing.

When Sam came out of the surf, dripping, the fawn awakened and slowly got to its feet. The sun and breeze dried Sam's body quickly, and he began to put his clothing back on.

"Well, boy," Sam said softly, "this is something, eh? All we need now is another castaway. Maybe a beautiful blonde, huh?"

The fawn lifted its head and sniffed through velvet nostrils. Then it turned its head toward the line of trees. Sam looked too. Out from the trees came the beautiful blonde. And she was perfect. The light breeze lifted her long ashen hair and pulled it back from the clean-cut lines of her face. Her blue eyes were

clear and friendly, and the corners of her generous mouth were quirked up a little. The thin summer dress she wore clung to the planes and curves of her body.

Sam stared and swallowed.

"Hello," I said, as if we had met on an Earth beach which was countless millions of parsecs away.

"He—hello," Sam said, and swallowed again. "You speak English!"

I smiled. "I should. I came from Earth."

"But how—" he stammered. "I can't believe—it's—"

"I started my Jump just outside the orbit of Mars exactly ten days ago," I said. "But the Jumper failed or something. I came out here and landed. I've been here three days."

"The same thing happened to me," Sam said. "Then it couldn't have been mechanical failure—I've heard theorists talk about space warps . . ."

"We might as well introduce ourselves. My name is Louise." I held out a hand to him.

He took it. His hand was hot and strong. "Sam—Sam Newman. That was my mother's name."

"Sam?" I asked. "Or Newman."

"Newman—I mean Louise."

I laughed. "I'm glad we've got that straightened out."

"Last name?"

I shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"But your ship," Sam said.

"Where is it?"

"Back there." I waved a hand toward the trees. "Miles. I thought of the advantages of the ocean too late."

"Any fuel?"

I shook my head. "That's why I left. I thought I might find some inhabitants here, if anywhere, so I started out. Then, today, I saw your ship land."

Sam's jaw dropped. "You saw me land? But why—?"

"I wanted a little time to think, to make up my mind," I said. "I've been watching, trying to decide. If you had been some men I've seen—or even some I've known—well, a planet is a pretty big place. And loneliness is preferable to a lot of things."

Sam shuddered. "God!" he said. "You might have—" The thought that he had been on trial struck him with a sudden sickness. "You might have decided to go away . . ."

"Would that have been a tragedy?" I made it light.

"Louise"—Sam's voice was husky and low—"trite as it seems, you were the answer to a prayer. Just before you step-

ped out from the trees, I thought that just one thing was needed to make this paradise complete. You."

"But you didn't know me," I objected.

Sam's voice was so soft I could scarcely hear it. "I've known you all my life."

I knew how he felt. I felt the same way. I knew what it was to be alone, completely alone, waiting throughout eternity for one personality to shatter your loneliness and bring life into an aching void.

"You said you'd been watching me," Sam said. "I thought I felt eyes on me back there in the trees."

I nodded, smiling. "I know. I thought you were going to shoot me."

Sam's jaw tightened and the muscles rippled. "The second shot would have been for me." He looked down at his feet. He noticed that his feet were bare and his shirt was open. He closed the shirt hastily and looked up at me. "You've been watching. Then you saw—" He turned red.

"That's when I made up my mind," I said, laughing. "I decided that no man who loved swimming and animals could be altogether bad."

Sam looked down. The fawn was rubbing against his leg,

looking at Louise. Sam knelt. "Louise," he said, "this is Bambi. Bambi, this is Louise."

"Hello, Bambi," I said.

Then, for a little while, we didn't say anything. We stood there in the silence and it wasn't embarrassed but somehow thoughtful and peaceful with the only sound the soft surf breaking against the silver shore. For one person is all the loneliness there can ever be, but two persons—a man and a woman—is loneliness shared, which isn't loneliness at all but a world, entire and complete.

Sam looked up finally. "No inhabitants?"

I shook my head. "Only us. We're the inhabitants."

Sam got to his feet and held out his hand to me. I took it and we turned and walked to where the grass met the sand. We sat down and Sam put on his shoes and we looked at the sea and the stars and the sky.

"We're all alone," I said. "Forever and ever."

We talked and fell silent, but we never said anything more important than that and the things we said were unimportant because we were both thinking the same thing and we were both hoping it would be tender and sweet and wonderful and lasting. And it was.

The sun went down and the

stars came out and the night was just a little cooler than the day but not uncomfortable. Neither of us thought of food. When it got very dark we lay warm beside each other looking up at the stars. Sam couldn't recognize any of the constellations or any of the stars.

"No one will ever find us," He said it with a kind of joy, trying to hide it from me that he was glad, as if he could ever hide anything from me. He rolled over on his side to look at me. "Louise—were you—married or anything?"

I shook my head. "Not married or anything."

I put a finger over his lips. "It doesn't matter," I said softly. "Nothing matters that happened before. I don't want to know. We were born again here, and all the past is gone—so far away that we could never find it if we searched a million lifetimes. It never happened. There's just—us."

He kissed me and there was no passion in it—only wonder and happiness. "Louise—" His voice was almost lost in his throat. "I love you, Louise."

"I love you, Sam."

But when he slept, the name he muttered was "Fran."

In the morning life begins again. In the morning we walk-

ed back to his ship. Food was no problem. Fruits and berries were plentiful—apples and peaches and pears and plums and cherries—every day we discovered something new but familiar. From the ship's stores we got canned meats and vegetables—we never saw any other animals than Bambi, although Sam insisted that obviously there must be others. Bambi wandered in and out of camp, but he was always there when Sam wanted him. Sam liked to play with him, and Bambi enjoyed it.

The first day Sam built a shelter—a bower was what he called it—at the edge of the clearing where the ship was, under the trees. I didn't want to sleep in the ship or even go inside it.

"That's the past," I told Sam. "It's as dead and meaningless as a monument. The sooner we forget what it is and what it stands for the happier we'll be."

Sam agreed with me. The next time he went to the ship for food he returned without his gun. He built the bower, and he took a long time at it, lacing limbs together and thatching it with leaves to keep off the occasional showers. He was good with his hands, and he liked to keep busy.

That night he slept peacefully.

The second day we explored a little and looked over our sup-

plies. We had the ship's stores and fruit was plentiful, but there was nothing growing that would keep. Sam worried about it.

"If it gets colder we might be in for something," he said. "We could weather one winter in the ship, I suppose, but the next—"

I shook my head. "I don't think it will get any colder. I think it will always be like this."

He talked about wobbles and ecliptics and temperate zones, but it didn't mean anything. The weather wasn't changing, and it wasn't going to. I was sure of that.

He stirred a little in his sleep that night.

The morning of the third day we went to look for my ship. I tried to talk Sam out of it, but I knew it wasn't any use. There might be fuel left, he said, maybe even enough to make an exploratory trip, and we could use the supplies. Maybe we could even locate some inhabitants.

All that day we walked away from the ocean, and we saw nothing new—nothing at all. Trees identical with those that grew around our camp, spaced out on soft green turf. No animals. We walked slowly but steadily, eating fruit picked on our way. Sam began to get restless. Sometimes he would peer

far ahead or swing around and stare back the way we had come.

Toward evening we were walking up the side of a low hill. Suddenly Sam stopped. He looked toward me, his eyes vague and thoughtful.

"You know," he said, his voice low and tense-sounding in the quietness, "I have a strange feeling that maybe we'll come to a place where all this ends, where it stops being and there's nothing. Like maybe we'll climb to the top of this hill and we'll look down and there won't be any trees and turf or anything. Like it's being created before us, rolled out like a green carpet, and just beyond where we can see, it's something else entirely, something unimaginable."

"You and all the other horizon-chasing explorers."

I smiled and a moment later he smiled and shook his head and took my hand and we climbed to the top of the hill. As far as we could see there were the same trees and turf.

We slept under the sky that night, and Sam muttered but it never turned into words.

The next day we reached a point farther than the distance Sam estimated I could have walked, and we searched in circles the rest of that day and the next. In the middle of one

clearing I finally stopped and shook my head bewilderedly.

"They all look the same," I said. "I don't know where I put it down. Let's give it up, Sam. It isn't important now. Later we can map this area with landmarks and things and search for it, but I want to get back to our—home. Funny, isn't it? We've only been here a week, and already there's a place I think of as home."

Sam argued. He really wanted to search some more, but he finally gave in. We started back.

At our camp, life fell into a regular pattern. We woke. We ate. We swam in the impossibly blue sea by the silver sands. We fished. We ate and talked. We made love. We slept. It should have been paradise, and it was. But Sam was restless. He needed something to do, and here there was nothing that needed doing. He began to talk about building a sailboat, and he did work at it now and then, but he never seemed to get very far with it. And in the night he had begun to moan and say one name over and over again.

One evening we were sitting together after our meal. The sun was still shining through the trees, and I knew it was building up in him and there was nothing I could do but hope.

"Fran," he said, "I think we should search—"

He stopped. *Fran*, he thought. *What a stupid thing to say. What a horrible thing to say.* He glanced at me to see if I had noticed, and I sat there with the sun on me, not moving, not looking at him, feeling his eyes. *And yet, he thought, there is a resemblance. The dark hair, the mouth . . . The dark hair!* He cast his mind back and I saw myself in his mind as he had seen me when I stepped forth from the trees with blue eyes and a generous mouth and ash-blond hair. And it was something I couldn't help because he wanted it so hard.

He moved away from me a little. His thoughts churned. *Dark hair!* He looked around him slowly and suddenly scrambled to his feet and ran to the ship and climbed up the ladder. I knew what he had gone for and I waited for him to come back and I hoped. Because there was nothing left but hope.

When he came back he had his gun hanging at his hip again.

"Stand up," he said harshly. He towered above me, his feet spread apart, his face dark and angry. I stood up. "What are you?" he said.

"I—"

"I'll tell you what you aren't.

Human, for instance. You aren't human!" His mouth curled as if he had tasted something disgusting and horrible. "No wonder we couldn't find your ship. There wasn't any ship. You belong here. You're a native. You can change. You can change the color of your hair and the shape of your mouth. Maybe you can change more than that. And I've been making love to you and I've been in love with you and I didn't know—What are you?"

His voice had been rising steadily. Now it cracked and broke in a thousand brittle pieces.

"You," he said. "The most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And maybe you aren't even female. Maybe they don't have male and female here."

"Oh, yes," I said. "I'm female."

He didn't hear me.

"It's all been a game—a horrible, deadly game. What's real and what isn't? You aren't. I know that. Where are the rest of your kind? What kind of foul monster have I been making love to? *What are you?*"

His voice ended in a shriek. He pulled out his gun and whirled, peering into the woods, pointing it here and there, the fat barrel trembling.

"Come out!" he sobbed. "Come out, damn you! Come out!"

"There's only me," I said quietly. "I'm whatever you want me to be."

He didn't hear me. He didn't understand me. Nothing could penetrate the thunder of blood pounding through his brain. But suddenly he swung around to face me again, suddenly aware that his back had been exposed to me.

"God!" he said. "God! And I thought this was paradise!"

He shook and the gun trembled and his finger tightened on the trigger. I knew what was coming, and I shrank back with horror. The trees trembled and the ground writhed.

"It was, Sam," I whispered. "It was."

"Change, damn you!" he shouted. "*Change! I want to see you as you really are!*"

His thoughts—mad, violent, powerful—wrenched at me, twisted me, tortured me. I changed. Hatred, terror, and horror were in his eyes as he stared at me and thought he saw me, and I could not tell him that he saw only what he had willed to see. I could not tell him that I did only what he willed me to do.

"God." He whispered. "God."

I came toward him, my clawed hands outstretched. His finger tightened convulsively on the trigger. A wave of heat crisped

my body, but it was nothing to the pain in my mind. He could not stop me, of course. He could not stop me with his gun, and it was too late for anything else. I was close to him now, and my hands were reaching for his throat and squeezing, squeezing . . .

The last thing he ever heard—I know he heard it—was a low whisper that might only have been the wind sighing through the trees.

"I love you, Sam."

He was dead. He was gone. And now that he was gone the reality that had been created for him—that he had created out of his desires—went back to another reality, no more real and

perhaps not as much. With the fulfillment of his desire the trees melted back into the ground and the turf was no longer grass and I drew back into myself too, the part of me Sam had called Louise and there was nothing but unending stretches of flat, featureless plain which from a great distance looked green.

One thing remained. Not far from where the blue sea lapped the edges of the plain stood a tall, slim spire, like a monument. Nearby was a mound, at one end of it a small, flat slab of stone. On the stone were three words:

SAM NEWMAN

Killer

Poul Anderson has been one of the most non-static writers in the whole science-fiction field. He began years ago by writing stories about cultural changes, moved from there easily into the action-romance type—of which *ROCKET STORIES* has already sampled—and has recently been proving that he can write "think" pieces as few can. He seems intent on examining the whole body of science for ideas for the future, and then using the ideas as part of a soundly human series of fresh and compelling stories.

One of his most recent stories begins in the September issue of *SPACE SCIENCE FICTION*. Entitled *THE ESCAPE*. It deals with one of the oldest problems of the human mind—the fact that man only uses a small part of his brain, and probably of his potential intelligence. Anderson assumes that this can't be logical, but must be the result of an accident. Then he removes the accident. And what happens to morons—and animals—when they begin to think fully makes one of the finest stories we've read for a long time. It shouldn't be missed!

FLOWER GIRL

BY CHESTER COHEN

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

It was a rotten world, and the things that lived on it should never have been spawned on any planet within reach of the star ships. Yet among the monsters and the beast plants, there was still one being with courage . . . and something more!

There was a large concave outcropping of pitted red rock just below the lip of the ledge. The Chief Mate stepped down on it, then abruptly sprang back, as its glistening surface began to tremble violently.

Involuntarily, he shuddered. It had felt like a wet sponge.

Now, hundreds of tiny orifices in the red, fleshy surface began to dilate with a soft sucking sound. A pinkish ooze suddenly spouted up like an eruption of miniature geysers. A small pool was forming, bubbling softly as it rose.

Gingerly, the Mate picked up a small green twig and dropped it into the bubbling slime. The twig was immediately engulfed by the pink pool, dissolving rapidly into a small oily brown spot

which disappeared as they watched.

The carpenter, standing beside him, gasped.

The Mate turned to him. "Better warn' the boys," he said in a strained voice.

As the carpenter shouted to the weary, ragged file of men who were stumbling down the rough slope above, the Mate lifted his binoculars and surveyed the area below. As he had feared, it was dotted with thousands of the strange red masses. Cautiously, he selected a path through them and started down again.

He moved slowly now, through huge clumps of thorned brambles which clutched tenaciously at his uniform as he pushed on. Often, he was forced to turn off the path and struggle through rak-



ing patches of thick, sharp-spiked nettles to avoid one of the horrible red bulks which swelled out over the path like a huge blob of dirty gelatin.

Skirting the lip of a sudden crater, the Mate heard a shrill, piercing shriek behind him. He spun around and saw the men racing back up the slope toward the sound which was being repeated now in a blood-curdling crescendo. With a sick feeling of dread, he scrambled up after them.

They stood gaping with horror beside a jagged rent in the side of the narrow path. A few feet below, the Mate saw a jumble of blue-clad arms and legs thrashing violently in the middle of a shuddering red mass. The screaming had ceased.

In seconds, the movements of the limbs slowed to a few feeble spasms, and the pink ooze rose and enveloped the victim. A moment later, nothing remained but a greasy, reddish splotch which quickly disappeared in the glistening slime. The slime was bubbling softly.

"The young lad slipped right through the wee ledge here, Sir," said the carpenter, hoarsely.

One of the other men went over to the other side of the path and was sick.

When they reached the bot-

tom of the fearful slope, a long hour later, they were confronted by an almost impenetrable wall of nightmare growths that fairly shrieked with dazzling colors.

Tremendous vines, three feet thick, twisted high into the air, intertwined in a sinuous web of shimmering white, like a great throng of alabaster serpents. Huge scarlet nettles waved their bristling, jagged arms in the breeze, like chromatic lightning-strokes. Out of the black muck of the jungle floor, gigantic yellow leaves fanned up, dripping a dark, viscous fluid like thick blood. Beyond them, in the deeper gloom, small clusters of egg-shell blue reeds thrust their slender, segmented stalks toward the sky.

They had been standing there for several minutes, staring in open-mouthed fascination at the vast, wild riot of colors before the Chief Mate finally roused himself. With a sigh, he flipped up the flap of the scabbard at his side and drew out a curved, gleaming blade.

Moving forward, he swung it hard at a low-hanging vine in front of him. An intense shock of pain surged through his arm, and the blade bounced back. Viciously, now, he swung again—and again. Finally, he succeeded in cutting a small, slant-

ing gash in the rubbery surface of the vine.

A small cascade of bright purple grains poured from the wound and formed a tiny dry pile at his feet.

He turned and swung the blade at one of the giant nettles. A spiked branch lopped off and fell to the ground. The remaining cross-section was hollow—and dry.

Going over to one of the giant leaves, the Mate dipped a finger into the thick dark fluid that drooled from its fringed edge. The fluid felt like melted wax. A slight burning sensation tingled the tip of his finger.

Hastily rubbing the finger against his blouse, he turned and faced the silent group. "Looks like we'll have to push on, boys," he said, grimly. "But there's a clearing on the other side. We can make camp there and start back in the morning."

Abruptly, he turned and began to hack at the dense foliage. The carpenter drew his blade and joined him. Together, they worked at it for twenty minutes, then stepped back exhausted. Two crewmen immediately stepped forward to take their place.

Continuing to spell each other at intervals, the little party finally reached a small, flat clearing, several hours later. It was

surrounded by tremendous tendrilled plants.

A rasping chorus of snores raked through the dark silence of the night from the other side of the clearing. The air held a strange, pungent odor. The Chief Mate sat up and lit a cigarette.

An intense weariness began to creep over him. His muscles felt like wet rags. He closed his eyes and was immediately shaken by a sickening vertigo. Discarding the cigarette, he fell back on his air-mat.

Suddenly, he snapped awake and peered into the darkness around him, a vague fear stirring in the pit of his stomach. But he saw nothing among the still, tendrilled plants.

The sharp smell in the air irritated his nostrils. He began to feel sick again. Then his mind clouded, and he slept.

He was jerked awake again by a biting ring of pain around his right forearm. As he started up, the arm was roughly pulled back and he crashed heavily to his side.

He felt something twist around his torso and constrict around his chest. Gasping, he lashed out desperately with his feet. His legs were grasped in mid-air and he was lifted into the air. Frantically, he strained against the tightening bonds.

Screams of fear came to him from the other side of the clearing, as he was swung gently through the darkness. Above the shrill chorus, the carpenter's deep rasp bellowed an obscene counterpoint.

Then he passed through a thick, leafy curtain which brushed over him like a damp cloth. The sounds from the camp abruptly ceased.

Now, he could hear a soft, rhythmic padding behind him. There was a faint trace of the strange smell which had so sickened him earlier in the evening.

Dawnlight was beginning to pierce the netted roof of the jungle. The Mate twisted his head, peered up at his silent captor, then gaped in blank astonishment.

Padding along behind him on huge green legs, thick as tree trunks, was one of the giant plants that had surrounded the camp site. Atop its enormous stem nodded a round, grooved ball, set with a dozen faceted knobs which gleamed with a faint iridescence.

The stem was a dark, mottled-green and several sinuate tentacles hung down from it. Four of these were wound around the Mate's body like immense serpents.

The creature was moving rapidly along the rough, cre-

vassed ground on thick discoid pads. It wove deftly in and out among the thorned growths which lined the path, and finally came out on a vast, gleaming desert.

In the brilliant glare, the Mate saw several hundred similar creatures dispersed about the desert in various attitudes. Nearby, three of them were gathered around a large crimson protuberance in the soft volcanic ash of the desert. It looked something like an immense cactus. Each of them had a green tentacle inserted in one of the many apertures in its huge stem.

Now, the grooved balls crowning their long, mottled-green trunks swiveled around toward the Mate's captor. Their faceted knobs flashed and, withdrawing their tendrils from the scarlet protrusion, they turned and padded swiftly to its side, their knobbed spheres bobbing vigorously, as they moved.

The Mate was now subjected to the scrutiny of three dozen glowing knobs, suspended close above his sweating face. Green tendrils reached down to probe with embarrassing intimacy.

One of the creatures was distinctly different from its fellows. Its coloration was softer, richer. The knobbed ball, now bent so near to his face, shone with a light, velvety patina. The

touch of its tendril on his skin was like a gentle caress.

As the tendril delicately explored the rough topography of the Mate's face, strange shivers of emotion surged through him. Vague longings tugged at his mind. Deeply shocked, he realized, suddenly, that the creature's touch was unquestionably feminine.

Now, its iridescent knobs began to glow with a disturbing warmth. Then it suddenly swung away from him, as a long tendril from behind it unceremoniously pulled it back.

There was a great commotion in the jungle behind him. Then he heard the carpenter's rasp booming out a loud flood of invective against his captor.

A great horde of the creatures now came padding across the desert, bobbing and rustling in an agitated rhythm. Quickly, they congregated around the dangling Earthmen and ran their prehensile tendrils, unabashedly, over the helpless captives.

Suddenly, the Chief Mate's captor lashed out with one of its tendrils. It flicked against several of the animated creatures like a whip, snapping out a harsh staccato of jarring sound.

Half a dozen of the creatures spun around precipitately. Their faceted knobs glowed iridescent-

ly, for a moment, then flashed like signal blinkers, and their sinuous tendrils drooped. The Mate read an attitude of complete deference in their flagging postures.

Craning his neck, he saw a series of brilliant flashes streak out from the glowing knobs on the cephalate ball high above him on his captor's mottled-green trunk. Several of its tendrils were undulating like perturbed serpents.

Then he was gently swaying again in the creature's tendrilled grasp, as it turned and slowly moved away. The others dejectedly followed along behind them.

Near the edge of the desert, again, the weird group halted. The Chief Mate saw his captor's faceted knobs flash several times. Then the others returned a few brief flashes and moved toward the jungle.

Shortly afterward, they returned, carrying several purple vines and large sheaves of huge, white webbed leaves which they heaped on the ground in a rough circle. Then each of the creatures took up a vine and several leaves, and turned their knobbed spheres toward the Mate's captor.

The Mate peered up at his captor and saw three of its

knobs flash a brilliant, cadenced design.

Abruptly, a series of fantastic gyrations began among the six creatures. The Mate saw green tendrils whirl and flash in a complex pattern like a myriad Chinese prayer-wheels gone wild.

Fascinated, he watched the rapid interplay of green tendrils flailing the air like a swarm of whirling serpents. Their movements were incredibly coordinate in a lightning rhythm too fast for his bleary eyes to follow.

His body had grown terribly stiff and sore. The cramped muscles tingled with pain. His joints felt numb. A dull ache throbbed in his head.

Several minutes passed before he finally realized that the strange creatures were engaged in some kind of incredibly rapid weaving process. Red-eyed, he saw a circular network rise, in a great dome, to a height of fifteen feet. Purple and white lattice-work curved up into the cloudless sky like an immense beehive.

Now he saw the creature's movements begin to slow down. At the summit of the huge structure, they were fashioning a tremendous top-knot of gnarled purple vine roots, bound tightly in a rough ball. It crowned the weird structure like some strange savage symbol.

The Mate was in a darkling daze when he suddenly felt himself swaying forward again. He forced his burning eyes open and saw, dimly, a green swarm of snaky tendrils lifting one side of the gigantic dome, a few feet ahead.

His captor halted. Then, when the base of the dome was almost vertical, the Mate went flying into semi-darkness.

A loud, guttural groan awakened him. He opened his aching eyes and looked into stygian darkness. Pain shot through him as he attempted to rise. There was a stinging ache in his joints, and the top of his head was throbbing sickeningly.

He fell back, panting. Then he heard another groan which broke in a racking, sputtering cough. It came from somewhere on his left in the darkness. He tried to lift himself again, gritting his teeth against the piercing waves of pain, and sank back on his elbows.

"Who's that?" he called, and was shocked at the thick rasp of his voice.

A squeaky, bronchial wheeze came out of the darkness. "It's 'Chips', Sir."

"Where are the others, Chips?" asked the Mate.

"They're a' here, Sir," the carpenter wheezed. "Except Feingold. Those blasted mon-

strosities broke his back. They left him back there. I'm all bunged up, too, Sir. I think they've busted my chest — the blasted, filthy, heathen—" He broke off in a crackling fit of coughing.

Finally, the spasms subsided. "The others are blacked out here, Chief," he said after a moment. "They may be dead. I dinna ken, for I canna move much."

Straining his aching muscles, the Mate struggled to his feet, teetering dizzily. His head was reeling. Panting, he extended his arms like a tight-rope walker and managed to keep his balance. Slowly, his head began to clear.

He felt for his flashlight. The belt clip was empty. His jungle blade was also missing. Fingering the hollow sheathe, he suddenly realized that he was in his stocking feet.

"Chips!" he shouted, hoarsely, "did they take *your* boots, too?"

"Aye, that they did, Sir," replied the carpenter. "And ma knife and flash, too. But they didna get ma tank. I have it here. You'll be wantin' a drink, nae doot?"

"What in hell could they want with our blasted boots?" mused the Mate.

"I canna understand that, Sir," croaked the carpenter. "Ach! They're verra weird beasts."

"They sure as hell are," snapped the Mate. He stepped in the direction of the carpenter's voice. Then his foot struck against something rigid and he fell headlong in the darkness, cursing loudly.

"That will be Curry, Sir," said the carpenter, sadly. "I heard him groaning a while ago. He hasna moved since."

The Mate lifted the inert, bony body and felt for the pulse. He could feel the man's close-cropped head dangling limply against his chest. Dropping the wrist, he reached over and examined the base of the drooping head.

"He's dead, Chips," he called into the darkness. "Neck's broken."

"Och, I thought so, Chief," said the carpenter, mournfully. "I'm wonderin' about the rest o' them."

Just then, a soft, rhythmic padding came from somewhere outside their strange prison. It sounded like a chorus of muffled drums.

"Here they come, Chief," wheezed the carpenter, breaking into another fit of coughing.

The Mate was crawling over the powdery ash of the floor to investigate the other crewmen. He found two who were still alive. His clumsy attempts at

resuscitation finally succeeded in reviving one of them. The man called feebly for water.

"Can you hand over the tank, Chips?" asked the Mate.

"Aye, I think I can manage it, Sir," said the carpenter.

There was a series of painful groans, and the Mate groped toward the sounds in the darkness. Finally, he contacted the tank in the carpenter's outstretched hand.

As the crewman gulped noisily at the mouth of the tank, the Mate heard the approaching sounds of padding grow louder. Then they slowed and stopped right outside, as he was turning to the other crewman who was still unconscious.

Now, he heard a slow, soft creaking sound. He glanced over his shoulder and saw, dimly, a dark forest of huge legs, as the side of the queer structure rose slowly toward the black, starless sky.

Disregarding them, he turned back to the unconscious form beside him. The man's breath was coming in short, feeble gasps. The pulse was growing very faint. Suddenly, it ceased.

The Mate dropped the limp hand, as a thick, snaky tendril snapped around his waist like a whip-lash. Then it yanked him back over his heels and he

crashed on his head in the deep ash, breathing dust.

A blood-curdling shriek filled the air. It sired past the Mate's head as he was scrambling to his feet. Then something struck his shoulder and sent him sprawling again.

"It's got Hardin, Chief!" the carpenter shouted in the darkness.

The Mate sprang to his feet in a boiling rage and leaped at the vague form as it was leaving the huge hut. Half a dozen tendrils struck his abdomen with the force of a giant cat-o'-ninetails. He collapsed against the latticed wall, gasping.

For an agonizing eternity, he lay in the dust, choking. There was a sickening ache in the pit of his stomach. Then, slowly, his breath returned and he sat up, panting hoarsely.

He was dragging himself to his feet when the odd structure crashed to the ground again in a big cloud of dust. Somewhere in the darkness he heard the carpenter croaking vile obscenities amid explosive fits of coughing.

The Mate stepped slowly through the darkness to the old man's side.

"Easy now, Chips," he said, reaching down and patting the old man's shoulder. "Calm down,

old man, we've got to figure a way out of this."

He turned and felt the lattice-work of the wall, trying to rip through the tough, fibrous leaves without success. Wearily, he turned back to the carpenter and sat down.

"Let's have some water, Chips," he said. "I've been breathing this damned dust for hours. Seems like I fall on my nose every time I make a move."

The carpenter finally quieted and handed him the tank. The Mate snapped open its cap, held the spout to his mouth and gulped thirstily.

"Here's the way I figure it, Chips," he said, after a moment, wiping his mouth on his dusty sleeve. "If only *one* of them comes in again when they come back for their next victim, I'm going to try to get him from behind. If I can climb up its back — or its trunk, or whatever the hell it is — I might be able to do some damage to that damned pumpkin up there. I'll swear that's the creature's head."

"Aye, it appears to be, Sir," said the carpenter.

"And those queer knobs on it," the Mate continued, "look like big diamonds — I'd swear those are its eyes."

"Aye, Chief, you're right," the carpenter agreed. "I'm certain

of it. The blasted monstrosity that grabbed me spotted me blasted knife before I had a chance to use it on 'im."

"Anyway," the Mate went on, "if I can cripple the monster somehow, we might manage to sneak through the others outside. I figure they'll be too busy holding this damned cage up for their buddy, to spot us crawling out, way down there on the ground beneath them."

"But I can hardly move, Sir," protested the carpenter.

"I've taken that into consideration, Chips," the Mate replied, confidently. "I'm going to carry you."

"Ye'll never make it, Sir," said the carpenter, hopelessly. "Better leave me; I'm done for, anyway."

"The hell you are!" snapped the Mate. "The medics'll fix you up fine, soon as we get back to the ship."

Suddenly, a distant scream ripped through the silence outside. It rose in a shrill, piercing crescendo, filling the two men's hearts with dread. Then, abruptly, it ceased.

The two men sat silent in the darkness.

After a moment, the carpenter spoke. "They'll be comin' back for us, now, Chief," he said quietly.

"Yes," the Mate hissed between clenched teeth, "and I'll

be waiting for them." He got to his feet and crossed the ashy floor. Crouching beside the wall, he waited, resolutely.

The huge creature was bent slightly over the corpse. The Mate poised himself on the balls of his feet, then took three running steps and leaped high into the air at the creature's great trunk. He clutched wildly at the smooth column and tried frantically to shinny up it.

Unconcernedly, the creature flipped back a tendril, grasped the Mate around the neck, and twirled him in the air like a pinwheel. Then, in the middle of a dizzy whirl, the creature suddenly released him, and he crashed against a slanting wall and rolled down into the soft dust, choking.

Getting to his knees, he shook his giddy head, then leapt up and rushed at the monster again. A tendril caught him in the face. He staggered backward and fell, gasping with pain.

It was several minutes before his stertorous breathing finally slowed. Blood was dripping from a long, slanting cut on his cheek. The monster, with its lifeless burden, was gone.

He sat up and rubbed his aching neck. "Whew! That was pretty rough, Chips," he said, wearily. "Didn't do a damned bit of good, either. But, damnit,

I thought the monster would be after you or me. Never figured it would grab up a dead man."

He got up and dusted himself off a bit. "I'll have to work out a different plan of attack for the next visit, Chips — He broke off, suddenly aware of the silence on the other side of the gargantuan hut.

"Chips?" he called out, apprehensively.

In the gray light which was beginning to seep through the interstices of the structure, the Mate saw, dimly, the still figure, huddled grotesquely on the powdery floor.

"Chips!" he shrieked as he staggered across the floor.

He dropped to his knees beside the still form. Sightless blue eyes stared up at him. There was a dried smear of blood below the mouth.

Rocking back on his heels, he sat, gazing dazedly down at the silent huddle. Cold fear froze his brain. A terrible loneliness welled up in him. He was forsaken, abandoned in a vast, uncharted universe, a horrible, unnameable death his only prospect.

He fell to the ashy floor and buried his bloody face in his arms. A nameless dread eddied through him. Black despair filled his mind.

The noisy rip of a blade through the tough fibers of the latticed wall behind him barely touched his clouded consciousness.

Something soft and smooth touched his neck and slid quickly around his shoulders, tugging gently. Dully, he looked up.

The next instant he was a fighting, kicking fury. Twisting in the swiftly-tightening embrace of several supple tendrils, he lashed out with his fists, hammering vicious blows at the soft green column before him. In an utter frenzy, he kicked out with his stocking feet, butting with his head, and smashing his knees against it, before he was finally pinioned in its tendril-grasp.

Gently, now, he was lifted high into the air and found himself staring into the glowing facets of a dozen bulbous knobs. Around them, the surface of the ball shone with a soft, velvety patina.

Disturbing sensations began to twist through him. His nerves tingled. Slowly, his body relaxed and he hung limply in the soft, resilient tendrils.

A tendril snaked down and touched his cheek. Then it moved, gently as a breeze, over the rough contours of his face, palpating the hard, bony ridge of his jaw. An electric thrill

coursed through him. Obscure imagery stirred in the back of his mind.

Suddenly, he felt the creature stiffen. It stood motionless for a moment, its faceted knobs glowing dully. Then it turned and padded swiftly across the ashen floor.

Now, the Mate heard the soft, rhythmic drumming sounds in the distance, trembling in the still air like distant thunder. A thrill of fear started through him.

Gathering speed, the creature leaped through a great, jagged hole in the far wall of the queer structure. Beneath it, lay the Mate's jungle blade, gleaming in the sun like a coveted jewel.

The Mate was blinded by the sudden fierce glare of the gleaming white desert. Intense heat burned against his eyelids.

Now he heard a soft hissing sound below him. He opened his aching eyes and peered down. He saw a tiny puff of steam rise from beneath the creature's discoid pads at every step. Moisture glistened on their bottom surfaces as they swung through the air.

Suddenly, he saw the reason for the missing boots. Arching his neck, he spat into the desert. The instant the saliva touched the ashen ground, it became a tiny puff of steam. He shuddered with horror at the sight and in-

voluntarily jerked his bootless feet up.

Behind them, the rhythmic drumming was getting louder. It sounded like an approaching army of mammoths.

The Mate's heart froze. Fearful visions of nameless tortures filled his mind. Imagination wove a terrible tapestry of mutilation and death.

Then, he felt the creature's pace quicken. In great leaping strides, it vaulted across the glaring desert, jarring his brain at every leap. Dizzily, he saw the jungle approach.

A few minutes later, the creature leaped lightly into the cool green shade of the dense tangle, smashing its way through a varicolored maze of weird growths.

A dark thicket of fluted blue reeds reared high into the air in front of them. Without slowing, the creature crashed through it and came out on a vague, tortuous path. Here, it swung around and sped along in a swift, rhythmic stride.

Now, the Mate heard a loud, turbulent thrashing somewhere behind him. Immediately, pale-green pistons pounded beneath him as the creature increased its speed. Wind whipped his tattered clothing and fanned his face.

They were approaching a vast,

leafy curtain, now. It stretched across the path in front of them in an immense patch-work of overlapping yellow and green fronds, like the scaly skin of a gigantic reptile.

Without a slackening its pace, the creature shot forward and leaped through the shimmering curtain. It brushed over the Mate like a damp cloth. Abruptly, the thrashing sounds behind him ceased, as the fronds snapped together again.

As they sped forward, the Mate saw the disordered scramble of camping equipment scattered about the clearing. He looked, longingly, at the water tanks strewn along the ground. A terrible thirst was burning through him. His lips were parched. His tongue was thick and swollen.

Suddenly, hysteria burst in his brain. In a frenzy, he tried to free himself, writhing in the creature's supple embrace. He slammed his head against the soft green trunk in a futile attempt to communicate his terrible need.

But the creature only tightened its grasp and sped on.

At the edge of the clearing, it leaped into the jungle again and smashed its way through the vivid foliage. Twisting and turning, it wove in and out through

the tangled labyrinth at a dizzying pace.

Finally, they burst out of the jungle into blazing sunlight, and the Mate saw the small, sloping hill, shimmering in the glare. The creature swerved abruptly, and fled toward it.

As it started up, the creature slowed its pace a little, carefully avoiding the swollen red masses strewn over the slope like a rain of bloody sponges.

Halfway up the hill, the Mate heard a crackling crash behind him at the edge of the jungle. Craning his neck, he saw a great green horde of tendrilled monsters burst forth.

Towering above the others in the lead, was the Mate's previous captor. It was plunging ahead in great leaping strides, twirling a glistening object in one of its tendrils.

Turning back, the Mate saw they were approaching the summit of the hill. Suddenly, he felt the tendrils around him grow lax. Then the creature stumbled and almost fell, arching over him like a wind-swept tree.

Finally, it straightened again and staggered forward, its tendrils quivering violently against the Mate's body. At the top of the hill, it stumbled clumsily toward the other side. Its movements were growing unsteadier. Now, it shot ahead for a few

yards, then it slowed, swaying drunkenly.

As it started down the hillside, the creature gained momentum and plunged toward the jungle at the bottom. Then it dove into the tangled gloom, shuddering convulsively, and began to splash ahead through pathless muck.

Muscular spasms shivered through the creature's tendrils, rippling disconcertingly around the Mate's body. As it struggled, unsteadily, through the dense tangle, the frequency of the spasms increased. It was like being caught in the coils of a pulsing spring.

Occasionally, a light, musty odor wafted to the Mate's nostrils, reminiscent of dank mold.

There was a brilliant network of light streaming through the twisted web of vegetation ahead. The Mate's heart leapt with joy at the sight. Then he heard the threshing din behind him. The noise was rapidly getting closer.

Then, through the shining green web, he saw the gleaming black hull of the ship, poised gracefully on its gray landing treads in the middle of the bleak plain.

The Mate's eyes misted. He felt a great swell of joy at the sight. He was home again.

As the creature streaked across the plain in a sudden burst

of speed, the Mate shouted a warning to the ship.

"Ahoj, the 'Gernsback'! Ahoj! Danger behind! Man your guns!"

There was a thunderous din behind him now which sounded like a vast herd of stampeding buffaloes.

Suddenly, the creature stumbled and crashed to the ground. The Mate hit the hard, stubbled surface on his shoulder and sprang free of the creature's flagging tendrils.

The huge prostrate form was shuddering convulsively beside him as he scrambled to his feet. Then he saw the long, glistening red thorn protruding from the base of the creature's knobbed ball. A green, viscous substance was oozing around it.

One final spasm shivered along the creature's great length. Several of its tendrils fluttered weakly for a moment. Then it collapsed along the ground, withering rapidly, like an uprooted plant in the burning sun.

The Mate turned and fled toward the ship. A shower of glistening red shards rained around him. They pierced the hard ground, quivering like arrows.

Another spray of gleaming shards stung the ground as he raced forward. Then, he felt a

stinging pain in his ankle and fell headlong.

Almost immediately, he sprang up again and leapt toward the ship, as the sharp electric crackling of its forward guns sang in his ears.

A dull whoosh behind him made him turn in time to see a shattered monster crash to the ground like a felled tree, missing him by inches.

As he neared the ship, he heard a shrill buzz and saw the midships gangway unfold to the ground. He darted forward and leaped upon its bottom step. The guns above spoke again, as he clambered aboard.

"Up ladder!" he shouted to the sailor standing by at the port, as he picked himself up from the deck.

The sailor immediately twirled a knob, and the gangway folded back into the ship, sealing the port.

"Wow! You just barely made it, Chief!" said the boy, taking up his rifle again. Then his face fell. "How about the others, Sir?" he asked.

The Mate gestured thumbs down and turned on his heel. Limping painfully, he padded down the corridor in his stocking feet to the wheelhouse.

Outside, the forward guns rasped in short, intermittent bursts.

The Old Man was directing fire on the starboard bridge wing. The Mate limped over to the chart table and waited, balancing on one foot.

"Fire '4,'" the Old Man called into the intercom, "three points abaft the beam."

There was a crackling volley overhead. Through the starboard porthole, the Mate saw three shattered monsters fall in a verdant heap. The stubbled terrain was now strewn with enormous wrecks.

Now, the surviving monsters were fleeing back toward the jungle in a colossal stampede. Many of them, torn and battered, fell in flight, and were trampled in the rush.

The Old Man put down his glasses and turned toward the second mate at the telegraph. "Half speed ahead, starboard engine," he ordered.

"Half ahead, starboard, Sir," said the Second. He worked one of the twin levers on the annunciator. A bell rang twice. A moment later, it was echoed below decks.

"Half ahead, starboard, Sir," the Second announced.

There was a deep, shuddering roar, and the ship started to move forward. The Mate felt the vibrations in the deck under his foot, as the ship's treads began

to snake their way over the rough ground outside.

At last, the Old Man turned away from the porthole and stepped down. His stern gray eyes found the Chief Mate and rested on him in a cold stare.

"Well, Mister?" he grunted.

Then the Mate's bleeding foot caught his eye. Abruptly, he turned and lifted a microphone from its hook on the bulkhead.

"Ship's doctor to the Master's room," he called into it. He repeated the order, then replaced the microphone.

Now, he stepped to the Mate's side and took his arm. Together, they moved toward the door, the Mate limping slowly on his wounded foot.

At the door, the Old Man called an order over his shoulder to the man at the helm. Then, silently, the two men left the wheelhouse.

When the doctor had finished bandaging his swollen foot, the Mate lay back and wiped his dripping face.

"Christ!" he said, reaching for a cigarette. His fingers were trembling, as he thumbed a match.

The doctor stood looking at the glistening red cone in his hand. He scrutinized its point from which a colorless liquid was dripping.

"I'll have to analyze it, before

I can tell, Captain," he said, fingering his thin black mustache.

The Old Man grunted. The doctor gathered up his gear and went out.

As soon as the door closed, the Captain swung around and faced the Chief Mate. "That was an utterly fantastic story you told me, Mister," he said. He held up a hand as the Mate started to protest. "But I believe it," he continued. "In any case, we'll soon find out."

At that moment, the intercom on his desk buzzed, softly. He swiveled around and switched it on.

"We've sighted the 'structure', Sir," reported a voice. "About twenty minutes ahead. Our altitude's two thousand. Shall we circle and land, Sir?"

"Any of them in sight?" asked the Captain.

"No, Sir," the voice replied. "The area's entirely deserted."

"All right, circle and land," said the Captain. "I'll be right up." He flipped the switch and got up. "Here's hoping you guessed right, Mister," he said to the Mate, as he pulled on his cap.

Eight crew members filed slowly down the gangplank and stepped, gingerly, onto the hot, glaring desert. Silently, they made their way to the weird,

scarlet protuberance and lifted the flat, translucent tanks from their backs.

Splitting into two groups, three men took positions around the plant while four men held the nozzles of their tank against the small orifices in its great stem. Now, the first three began to squeeze the soft, spongy surface of the stem. Glistening streams of clear liquid spurted out of the small orifices.

The eighth member of the group, having deposited his tank on the ashy ground near the plant, unslung his rifle and faced the dark, twisting jungle. Nervously, his little black eyes darted to and fro, as he scanned the grotesque tangle of brilliant foliage.

Suddenly, he shouted a warning. Immediately, the others caught up their tanks, snapped the caps shut, and lifted them to their shoulders. The next moment, a monstrous horde thundered out of the jungle toward them.

The lookout fired three short volleys, then turned and joined the wild rush to the ship. Already, glistening red darts were dropping all around them.

Reaching the gangway, they crowded up it in a mad scramble and leaped through the port, piling up on the deck in a sprawling, clattering heap.

The gangway watch twirled a knob, and the ladder folded back into the ship.

"Well, Mister," said the Captain, kicking the door shut and flipping his cap on the desk, "we've got drinking water again."

"It is potable, Sir?" the Mate asked, sitting up.

"H₂O, Mister," answered the Captain. "Good, clean, delicious H₂O." He held up the bottle in his hand. "How about a drink, 'm'?" he asked, facetiously.

He opened a drawer and took out two glasses. "Apparently," he said, filling them, "those odd plants store water — sort of natural wells." He handed a glass to the Mate and sat down.

The Mate forced himself to sip slowly his first drink of water in two days.

"Here's some more news for you, Mister," said the Captain, flipping a folded slip of paper to the Mate.

The Mate unfolded the yellow slip with a trembling hand. Then he breathed a great sigh of relief. "Local infection," he read, "amputation unnecessary."

"You're a lucky man, Mister," said the Captain, wiping his mouth. He stretched expansively, and belched. "Well, we'll be home in a month," he yawned. "Old Earth will sure look mighty good to me after all this mess."

"Yes, Sir," said the Mate. But his mouth was drooping. He was picturing the reception he would get when he went home to his wife. The story of his rescue by an apparently female creature will have been broadcast all over the planet. His wife was an extremely jealous woman.

"Why in hell hadn't he kept his stupid mouth shut about the intimate details?" he kept asking himself.

"Boyoboy, home again," said the Old Man, happily.

Many readers of science fiction logically enough also read widely among other fields—when they can find stories that have a freshness and interest to hold their attention. For those who like a good, fast-paced detective story (which means crime story nowadays), it might be mentioned that PRIVATE EYE is now being issued regularly. Like this magazine, it's based on the idea that the story is the thing, and uses top-flight yarns by both the old established names and by fresh new writers in the field. In the old, convenient format, it represents a genuine addition to the modern magazine field.

THE ROBOT MOON

BY STANLEY MULLEN

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH



Rocky Garstin was looking for the secret of the vanishing moon of Themis, with the hounds of the law at his heels. Then he stumbled on Graetha Lantz, who knew too much. Outcasts of the system, they fled toward the impossible, alone against a science greater than any men had found!

THEMIS—the mythical tenth satellite of Saturn, and one of the most famous of astronomical phantoms. Repeatedly “discov-

ered”—first by Pickering in 1905—its existence has never been confirmed. During the earliest years of telescopic



space exploration, a number of apparently reliable observations were made and an orbit computed. Later, all efforts by the Interplanetary Bureau of Survey to locate and catalogue the satellite proved futile. Several ships were lost, and the search was eventually abandoned. Legends exist that early (Martian) spacemen actually sighted and landed upon such a moon, only to escape hurriedly, frightened into silence by uncanny phenomena which afflicted them.

—*Delusions of the Astronomers*, J. Bell, Canalopolis, Mars, 2153.

I

The Girl on the Neptune

In a sick universe the healthy man becomes an outcast. In any atmosphere of general sanity, Rocky Garstin would have been below average, to put it kindly. He admitted as much. But the Solar System was trembling on the verge of one of its periodic fits of mass lunacy, which made Garstin's curious brand of independence and jungle ethics almost respectable. His virtues were those old-fashioned ones of ingenuity and reckless daring; his faults those of a love-sick, hungry sand-leopard. He needed both . . .

Nerves tightened as the luxury spaceliner drove through the crystalline darkness of space, slowing rapidly as fire pulsed round her forward atomjets. The long voyage from Callisto was nearly over. Far ahead loomed the magnificent spectacle of Saturn, the tilted rings a jewel-collar of phantom radiance. Nearer, the moon Titan showed a dazzling crescent on the sunward side of a bulk of curdled darkness.

Despite the reassuring whine of inertia stabilizers, strain ragged the passengers. Even Garstin, used to space travel, felt tension build in brain and body. For space-neophytes, it was far worse. Many must take to their shock cradles until the spaceship locked alongside the floating spacedocks above Titan. In memory of past deceleration agonies, Garstin winced with sympathy.

His search for the girl brought him to the lounge on the observation deck. There, in an alcove opposite the elevators, a willow-slender girl was singing the nostalgic "Spacewanderer's Song."

" . . . In that vast night of outer space,

My soul communing with the lonely stars . . . "

Setting was superb. Through the plastilux dome was visible a gulf of star-strewn void, a vast,

velvet-dark emptiness studded by lonely, steel-hard points of unflickering light. Though untrained, her voice was good, and it held a note of poignant weariness which arrested attention and built a perfect mood for the lyric despair.

This girl was the object of Garstin's quest. Since she had come aboard at Io, she had puzzled and intrigued him. Mystery, especially in women, attracted Garstin as a magnet draws iron. While waiting for the girl to finish her song, Garstin drew closer in the dim light to study her.

Mystery aside, there was much about her to repay study. Her voice held murmurous hauntings like the wind crying over desolated worlds. Angular shadows accented the bitter mockery of a Martian face. Lance-slender she was, and as delicately poised. Naked shoulders gleamed orange-pink above a simple swathing of Venusian spider-silk, diaphanous as a lover's tears. Where it veiled her body at all, it modelled the forms exquisitely. Slashed skirt was grace itself, and the hint of white thigh caught a gasp in Garstin's throat. She was young, but mature, full-bodied, in that exotic way of red desert dwellers.

With most of the passengers

feeling the pangs of deceleration, it was a poor time for such entertainment. A round of scattered applause marked the song's end. Icily detached, the girl acknowledged the sparse tribute, and turned to leave. Garstin blocked her way to the passenger elevators.

She stopped, said steadily, "Not you—again!"

Garstin laughed wryly. He persisted, "You can't say I haven't tried. All right, if I don't know you, I'd like to."

She stared scornfully. "It's not mutual."

Ignoring Garstin, she gave her long hair a nervous flick about her shoulders, then brushed quickly past into the elevator. By an inch, he beat the closing door. Cage controls were automatic. His finger poised above the panel of glowing buttons.

"Which deck?"

"Nine, and I'm getting off alone. If you annoy me further, I'll ask the ship's officers to restrict your . . . research."

Garstin grinned sharply. "Persistence is professional with me. Don't make me pull a badge on you."

The girl stiffened. "What is your profession—annoying women?"

"No, that's just a hobby. Call the ship's officers if you like. I

carry credentials to support my purity of motive. You're no red Martian, though you could pass for one. Faked passport and a phoney name on the passenger lists—"G. Speer, Io"—might be hard to explain. I know an Earthgirl when I see one, rare as they are out here. I'm an investigator for Tri-World Insurance. Do we talk, or shall I call the purser?"

Sudden pallor crept beneath the dark-toned skin. Both anger and sudden wariness lurked in the purple depths of her eyes. "One drink, then," she agreed bitterly. "In my stateroom. The *Neptune* will be tying alongside the spacedock above Titan in twenty minutes. There won't be time for much talking."

"Time enough."

The purring elevator stopped. A luminous "9" flashed and the automatic door slid open. Garstin followed the girl down a narrow corridor to her stateroom. Inside, she turned to face him. In the revealing brilliance of radilumes, her features worked with the impotent fury of a trapped wolf. Vagrant memory nagged his brain.

"Why hound me?" she said. "Sure, I changed my name, even my appearance. Always questions. I lost three jobs in a row over the detectives always prowling a round. I had to lose

myself to go on living, even to get a job. But I haven't done anything. I don't know anything."

Pieces of memory clicked in Garstin's mind. "Fool's luck," he commented aloud. "You reminded me of someone—yourself! Dyed hair, skin darkened, even the eye-color changed by tattooing. But you're Graetha Lantz."

Her expression hardened. "I thought you'd guessed."

"Slow," admitted Garstin. "I should have guessed. Speer to Lantz. Why not?"

The girl, Graetha Lantz, was fumbling in her purse. She fished out a tiny, blunt-nosed paralysis gun.

"All right," she said. "I'm Graetha Lantz. But I don't know anything about my father. I don't know where he is, or what happened to him. I do know he was a great man. Whatever he did, there was a reason for it. People laughed at him and hounded him too far. How would I know anything about his work, or what he did? I was a child, away at school. His secrets went with him when he disappeared. He's never written, or tried to locate me. What do you want with me?"

Garstin looked from the paralysis gun to Graetha's face, found no easy solution in either. He tried to explain.

"You don't understand. I could be on your side."

"Doing what?" she demanded acidly. "Helping me find my father, so you could torture him, throw him in prison or send him to the mines here on Titan?"

Garstin temporized. "He stole a whole shipload of medicines and drugs. Chiefly antibiotics. A dozen fortunes. None of the loot has ever turned up. I'm curious. I don't think your father was criminal. Crackpot, maybe. He could have had a brainstorm. But since he did not sell those valuable antibiotics on the black market, he is not a crook. Help me find him and the stuff, and it will lessen the charge. It needn't be prison or the mines. Just a short term in psycho."

Trembling, Graetha set down the paralysis gun. She reached a squat bottle from a cabinet and poured two drinks.

"You're wasting your time," she said hopelessly. "I wish I could trust you. I wish you really wanted to help. But I couldn't matter. I've told you. I don't know anything. But there's no place to start. I think he's dead. He was sick at the time, perhaps dying. Maybe he needed the medicine himself."

"Not a shipload," Garstin protested.

Graetha shrugged. "Drink

your drink, and go. You won't learn anything from me. Even if I knew, I don't trust you. I don't trust anyone." Her voice rode an ascending scale of hysteria.

Deceleration alarms screamed in the corridor. Vibration shocks rippled through the ship. Echoing pangs of nausea spiraled through Garstin. Graetha paled, moaned slightly and tottered. As she went limp, Garstin caught and held her, carried her gently to the bed.

Wordlessly she gestured toward the water thermos on the bedside table. Water. Garstin turned to get it.

Graetha was sitting up. She tossed off her brandy, held out the other glass to Garstin. Its taste, going down, warned him.

"You devil!" he gasped savagely. Her slender arms flung around him, clamped tight, strong as steel springs, imprisoning him. Breaking free, he pushed her against the wall.

"Let me go!" Graetha cried furiously. Catlike, she clawed at his face. Garstin struggled to hold her firmly while he found something to tie her up. Briefly, he wondered what drug she had used on him, how long it would take to work. Shadows dodged in his brain. Suddenly he sagged. Shards of darkness showered like swarms of burnt-out meteors. He was falling endlessly

through the vastness of deep space. Ahead yawned a dark nebula. It closed over him . . .

Awakening came painfully. With it came humiliation, chagrin. Outwitted by a skinny slip of a girl! His emotions toward her went through swift alternations of admiration and anger. She had managed. Torn sheets bound his hands stiffly behind him. Graetha Lantz had dumped him unceremoniously from the bed to the floor and trussed him neatly. It was hastily done. Knots gave at the first strain.

Head fuzzy, pounding, he forced himself to the fused quartz viewport. Time had passed. The *Neptune* had already docked.

Below was Spaceport Four, one of the tremendous floating docks which circle Titan to eliminate necessity for the dangerous and difficult landing of heavy spacecraft. The scene was brilliantly lighted confusion, hangars, surface decks, repair docks cluttered with spacecraft of all kinds and sizes. Ground crews boiled about like army ants, maneuvering spaceliners and clumsy freighter on tracks and guiding them into the capacious maws of waiting hangars. Ramps led to lower levels, crowded now with robot-

trucks and swift passenger-monocars.

Far below, like tiny flakes of light moving across the patterned surface of the moon, were spacesleds which had taken off for the various cities of Titan.

Garstin swore vividly. It did not help. Snatching at the visiphone, he dialed. A blonde dispatch-girl, with sad and worldly eyes, glowered at him.

"I'm trying to locate a girl," he snapped.

"What man isn't? Won't I do?"

"Skip it, sister. Official business. The girl came in on the *Neptune*. Have all the passengers trans-shipped?"

The bonde made a face, consulted her records. "Nearly all. What's the matter, bub? She steal your watch?"

Garstin described Graetha Lantz pungently, briefly, but with careful accuracy.

"City Five," the weary voice droned. "A cold cookie, if you ask me. Why take a chance?"

"Some other time." Garstin broke off, redialed. To Security Police Headquarters on Titan, using a tight-beam connection to avoid interception. The visiscreen blurred silver, cleared. A scarred and cynical face grimaced at him.

"Hello, Lazarus. Back from the dead, I see. How's insurance

chiseling, or have you run out of widows and orphans to kick in the teeth?"

With inner satisfaction, Garstin gave a top priority code-number, then spouted orders.

"Graetha Lantz came in on the *Neptune*. City Five. Check all terminals. No pick-up, just have her followed. Find out where she goes, who she sees, keep her out of trouble till I can take over. Get this—Hair dyed dark brown, artificial skin coloring, even her eye-pigmentation altered two shades lower. Get measurements from your files. Wearing junk jewelry and a dress of Gi-cloth to match her eyes when I saw her, but may have changed. And remember, that file is five years old. She's no kid any more. Quite an eye-ful. And smart. Don't let her get away."

The policeman yawned. "Routine. But why? Your company pulled us off the case. The file is closed, dead. Sure, Lantz was nuts when he pulled a fast one on them. But they won't like this. What is your interest, aside from the obvious one of the girl?"

"You'll never succeed as a cop till you start looking beyond the obvious," retorted Garstin. He rang off . . .

En route to City Five, Rocky

Garstin pondered his next move. Decision was spared him. As he set foot on the landing stages, a pair of burly and belligerent Security detectives moved in on him. With a firm grip on each of his elbows, they hustled him toward an official monocar.

Angrily, he struggled. "What is this?" he protested. "Haven't you got the wrong man?"

"How wrong you are isn't our business. You're Garstin. We have orders to pick you up. Skip the arguments, bud. The commissioner wants to see you."

In wrathful exasperation, Garstin subsided. Had Peters gone crazy along with the rest of the Solar System? What a time for a joke! Or was it a joke? . . .

II

Cold Trail

Police Headquarters was a beehive, a-swarm with more than ordinary activity. With rumors of war, both foreign and civil, and interplanetary diplomacy in the stage of acute hysteria, security became touchy and highly involved. All business and personal affairs became official business, and traffic funneled in and out of the building in continuous streams. Garstin's big escorts shouldered a passage

through milling crowds and dumped him roughly at the desk of an attractive red-haired receptionist outside the commissioner's office.

"Doggy Peters in?" Garstin asked, wasting a top-priority smile on the redhead. She eyed him dubiously, aghast at such casual disrespect for officialdom.

"I don't know," she snapped, reaching for the intercom buzzer. "I'll ask him."

Garstin sinuously evaded his captors, started for the door of the inner office. "Don't bother. I'm expected." Mechanically, the girl completed her connection. The intercom burred and rattled with the violence of reply.

"He'll see you," she repeated, dazedly. "I'll forget the rest of it. I'm a lady."

"That's your loss," Garstin called back, slamming the door against his burly escorts.

Like the office, its occupant was big, bare, efficient.

Behind a desk piled with official business sat a slate-eyed giant, largely stainless steel and synthetic flesh from the waist down. Long years in space had hardened his features and burned his complexion to a deep mahogany. Trapped into bureaucracy by his crippling injuries, Doggy Peters chafed at enforced inactivity and tried vainly to lose himself in his

work. Memories teased his face into a savage grin as he heaved himself painfully erect to greet Garstin.

"Like old times, Rocky," he said, indicating a chair.

"Not quite," observed Garstin acidly. "You're a hard man to see these days. Must be a big wheel now. Sending the cops to pull in an old friend."

Peters sobered, sighed. "You asked for trouble, Rocky. Using a priority code you had no right to. Ordering police to run your errands. We know the insurance company fired you. Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't toss you in jail?"

Garstin grunted, frowning. "Two reasons. First, you know me and like me too well. Second, I'm onto something big, big and deadly important. You owe me a favor, Doggy. There'd be less of you than there is if I hadn't stuck at the controls with hot-stuff burning the flesh off my hands. My scars ransomed six lives that time, Doggy. Yours was one of them. I'm not asking any kickbacks for it. But you know what kind of man I am. I won't lie to you, Doggy. This is on my own. The company kicked me out. And I need money desperately. I'm fishing for it in troubled waters. If I muff this, I'm finished. I left worse trouble behind me on Mars. This is a

real jam. It will take money, piles of it, to square it or to run and hide. I've scraped the bottom of the barrel. Don't pull the plug on me, Doggy."

Doggy Peters glanced uneasily at his incomplete anatomy. It was better than nothing, and he owed such as it was to Garstin and his atavistic guts. Garstin was one of those eternal problem-children born into the wrong century. Adventurer, hero, half-buccaneer, he was lost in the complexities of the Twenty-second Century. With his fiery independence of mind and action, he would never fit into the regimented routines of any mechanized civilization. He was a man for frontiers, and frontiers had reached a dead-end at Pluto.

Peters shrugged in grim obeisance to his debt, and to the implacable gods of space.

"What do you want on Titan?" he asked. "With a war building up, I have responsibilities. There's a limit to favors. I should throw you in jail until I check your back trail and find out what happened on Mars. Can they extradite?"

Garstin nodded gloomily. "Unless the war messes things up too much before then. It's murder. There were reasons, extenuating circumstances, but I

need money to prove it. Just give me twenty-four hours' start. That's all I ask."

Doggy Peters shivered. "Twenty-four hours' start for where? If you're caught in space when the war breaks—"

"I know," Garstin admitted. "But there's a chance. Remember the Lantz case? That's what got me fired. Nosing around, I dug up some curious things. Lantz's life and work, his writings. There's more to it than the records show. A lot more—"

"Possibly, but how does it fit in? If you did recover the stolen antibiotics, they'd belong to the insurance company that paid the claim."

Garstin scowled. "Not now. It's a technicality, of course. But with their file closed, the case abandoned, I could demand a third—as salvage. Can you imagine what that medicine will be worth? With a war threatening, prices will soar. The stuff will bring a dozen fortunes. A third to me. I can clear myself, and maybe clear Lantz, too. He was a great man, centuries ahead of his time, badly misunderstood. If he stole that shipment, there was a good reason. What, I don't know. But none of those drugs have turned up anywhere. I have a wild idea where they are. If Lantz is dead, they'll be intact. If he's alive, I believe he's the

kind of man who will listen to me. Those antibiotics will be needed desperately—to save lives. Will you gamble on me?"

Peters' head jerked, his eyes met Garstin's evenly. "I guess I already have, Rocky. Off the record, I've already called off the hounds. You'll have your twenty-four hours. An M-1 flash had come in to hold you for Mars. It's shelved, for the moment, for twenty-four hours, exactly. After that, be out of my district. I can't help you. Anything else you want?"

"I'll need a spacer. Any old tub."

"Take mine." He handed the coded light-beam keys across the desk. "About the girl. Call back. I'll find out where she lights. We kept a tag on her, anyhow, just in case we got a sudden interest in reopening the Lantz case."

"Peters, you're a dog! Fidus Achates, the faithful friend. You won't regret the twenty-four hours. If I come through this alive, I'll—"

"Send me a postcard, but don't sign it. I don't want to know what happens to you, where you go. Use your own judgment—but don't come back to Titan. You're a living embarrassment to your friends. Take care of yourself, Rocky. That's all."

By flashing his insurance investigator's badge, Garstin got into the Interplanetary Bureau of Survey. The place was a madhouse. For security reasons, during the duration of war-danger, every star-map and kinetofilm orbit chart was being locked up. In sudden panic, he sought authority.

"What can you tell me about Themis, the lost moon?" he asked the survey chief.

The man stared, whistled and nearly fell off his chair. "The false moon! Themis? You're joking, of course."

Garstin insisted. The official went to his files and returned laughing with a sheaf of sky-maps, obsolete stat-charts, electronic course-tapes and assorted reports.

"This is it," he stated, grinning unhappily. "You're lucky the stuff is not classified top-secret. May as well admit it. We don't even joke about Themis. It's the jinx of the bureau in this sector. Two surveyors have lost their licenses over it. Several times the thing has turned up in otherwise sound reports. Themis is supposed to be the tenth moon of Saturn, but it doesn't exist. Authoritative sources deny all existence. In 2037, after various observations, an orbit was figured. Then the thing disappeared for twenty-

five years. Every attempt was made to locate it definitely and prepare a survey for the charts. No luck. No Themis."

"Weren't some ships lost in the possible vicinity of its orbit?"

The survey chief flushed. "You can lose ships anywhere. Sheer incompetence. I've been over the orbit myself a dozen times with mass detectors which would have spotted a gnat in a nebula. Our instruments go bad at times, we get some screwy readings. Nothing definite. Take my word for it—there's no such moon."

Garstin grinned. "Could I have copies made of this stuff?"

"Take 'em all, if you want. They're no use to us. But don't rely on those projection films. Astrogration turned them down flat. Rightly."

"One more thing. Didn't some scientist suggest a theory to account for these astronomical phantoms?"

"You mean Lantz? That screwball! He was a neuro-biologist, not even an accredited physicist. Amateur astronomer. Too bad he never heard of astrology; he'd really have loved that."

"He had a theory about Themis?"

The official forgot his impati-

ence, chuckled. "Now that you mention it, he did. Suggested that these astronomical phantoms like Themis might actually exist in an interlocking time-plane, visible and material only for short periods when the co-existing time-planes overlapped. Ingenious hypothesis, but only that—hypermathematical nonsense. After he disappeared, some humorists suggested that he might have found Themis."

"Perhaps he did," agreed Garstin. They both laughed...

From a public visiphone booth, Garstin dialed the number of the police commissioner. While he waited for connection, his eyes idled with the banner headlines screaming from a public visiscreen across the street. All echoed a tragic note of mass hysteria, building hypnotically toward war. Sickened, he turned back to his call. Murder for profit; he could understand—not murder for ideals, however beautiful. Worst of all, the ideals would be false, bellwether thoughts misleading the sheep to the slaughter. His call went through. Peters appeared on the screen.

"You may be right about the girl," Peters said. "A man met her at the landing stages. They both registered at the Argonaut Hotel, under false names. An-

other man joined them, talked a short while and left. Possibly to arrange some deal . . . like a charter for a spacer. We're looking up the men. Have a sort of lead on one of them."

"Who?"

"If I'm right, Farlane. Discredited scientist who formerly worked for her father. Mixed up in an unsavory case involving manvivisection. Venusian semi-human guinea-pigs. Competent enough at his trade, but a butcher. You know a skunk by the smell, not by reputation."

"What's she doing with him?"

Peters shrugged. "I hope you'd know. Probaby looking for her father. But she's heading into trouble with Farlane. If you get chummy with her, tell her Farlane doesn't know either. Before we got pulled off the case, we learned that Farlane was trying hard to find the old man, probably for the loot. Other people were on the same trail, but it was cold all-round. Nobody found anything. Nothing to find. Oh, yes, even the Robot monopoly was interested. Lantz was working on mechanical and electronic brains at the time, and they figured he might have stumbled on something good enough to steal. That's between us, so forget I said it."

Garstin laughed harshly. "Okay. And I'll forget I called."

"Do that." Peters hung up rudely . . .

Through streets teeming with war-hungry mobs slowly building to critical mass, ripe for riots, Garstin made his way slowly and with difficulty to the Argonaut Hotel. It was a third-rate dump, catering to space transients, located only a few blocks from the landing stages. The lobby thronged with drunken miners and ugly transport workers, all spoiling for trouble. Not daring to risk profitless encounters, Garstin slipped into the hotel by a rear entrance and climbed the spiral-lift service ramp to the sixth floor. The corridor was a dim alley between closed doors. Wondering which room held the Lantz girl and her secrets, Garstin hesitated.

One door burst open with savage violence. Blinding light deluged the hall, pinched out in darkness. Sound ravened, echoed along the closed tunnel of the corridor.

Deafened, half-blinded, stunned by concussion, Garstin drove himself to the blast ruined doorway. In the confusion, he thought someone passed him, but could not be certain. At the doorway, he forced past the wreckage into the room. From behind a locked door to a connecting

room came a fearful cry, a pounding. Ignoring it, Garstin glanced around the shattered room. At his feet lay a hideous object which had been a man. The top of the head was gone, the rest was calcined horror of bone, flesh, teeth, looking oddly like a demonstration mannequin of an open-sectioned human body.

The pounding at the communicating door persisted. Garstin unbolted the door, stood back. Half-dressed, Graetha Lantz stood looking at him. An ugly bruise showed against the pallor of her cheek. Garstin was in no mood to appreciate the disclosures of disarrayed femininity. The girl's eyes wandered to the monstrous thing on the floor. Her knuckles jammed against her teeth to hold back a scream. She swayed.

Garstin leaped to catch her as she fell. Her head lolled like a broken-necked doll's head. Garstin eased her to the floor and propped her back against a wall. Slowly the glaze faded from her eyes, blood flowed back into the chalk-mask face. The terror of a stricken animal stared from her eyes.

"I didn't do it," she moaned. "I didn't . . ."

Garstin slapped her hysteria away. "Stop it. I believe you, but

I don't think the police will. Who is he? What happened?"

Graetha shook her head numbly. She bit bloodless lips and fought to control herself. "I don't know. After the others left, he broke in here, struck me, twisted my arm. He wanted me to tell where my father is. Then he locked me in the other room while he went through Farlane's boxes. That bag—"

A fit of shuddering seized her.

"I can guess," Garstin said roughly. "There must have been a booby trap bomb in the luggage."

"You don't understand," the girl wailed. "If Farlane was not back in two hours, I was supposed to open the bag. I know the bomb was in it. Now, looking back, I can tell from the way he handled it. I would have looked, and—"

"And blown your stupid, pretty head off. Nice friends you have. Farlane was not coming back. Hasn't that percolated yet? What did you tell Farlane?"

Graetha Lantz's eyes grew hard, suspicious. "Why should I tell you anything?"

"Suit yourself," Garstin said grimly. "You'll have to talk when the police get here. Shall we sit around and crack jokes while we wait?"

"Who are you—not the police?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps I can help. If you'll tell me all you know, I'll do what I can. You'll have to trust me, to believe that I mean your father no harm. I want to talk to him, that's all. I can't see that you've much to lose."

"All right," Graetha said hopelessly. "I'll tell you . . ."

"Make it brief. We haven't much time."

Voice trembling, the girl talked. "You know who I am. I don't know how, but on the *Neptune* you guessed that I came here to look for my father. Two men were to help me. Farlane and a man named Dazell. Farlane had worked with father, that's why I could trust him."

"Trust a woman to back the wrong horse."

"I couldn't know. The whole world seems against me. I had a clue. Some of father's notes got mixed up in my things when I went to school. Just recently, I found them. Farlane came to see me. When I mentioned what I'd found, he was wildly excited. Promised to help me find father. With what he knew or guessed, and these notes I'd found, there was something to go on. A good chance. If father was alive, we'd bring him back, help to clear his name. When you recognized me, I was terrified. Time was so important, and we could risk no

delay. We were to meet here, charter a ship, and then—"

Graetha paused as another fit of shudders rippled through her body. "They had seemed kind, considerate. Here, it was different. They demanded my notes, threatened me. There had been no reason to distrust them, but I had made an extra copy of the notes, just in case something happened to the originals. They said they'd decided not to take me along, since you had recognized me. That it would be more dangerous, might put the police on our trail. I held out, and they halfway agreed before they left. Afterwards, I found that they'd stolen my copies of the notes. I knew then that they had tricked me, weren't coming back. I was just about to look in the boxes and the bag that Farlane had left. He had said for me to go through them and keep his notes safe if anything happened to delay their coming back. Then that man came in. You know the rest. Hadn't we better call the police?"

Garstin considered. "Somebody has, by now. If we wait and try to explain to the police, there'll be a long delay . . . if nothing worse. We might still slip out of the hotel. Will you take a chance on me? Together, we might still have a chance of finding your father."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you've put a couple of butchers on his trail. If they get to him first, Heaven, help him. All they want is his loot. I'd prefer him alive. Do you?"

"How can you ask that?"

"Then let's go . . . unless you want a murder investigation around your neck."

Puzzled, the girl was weakening. Still reluctant, she let Garstin drag her into the corridor, now filling with people. At the head of the service runway, Garstin turned and addressed the curious crowd. "There's been an accident. Someone should call the police."

An approaching siren wailed through the streets toward the hotel as the pair plunged down the ramp.

"Do you know where we're going?" she gasped.

"I've guessed where," Garstin replied. "Themis. But I don't know *when*!"

Her eyes widened. "How did you learn that?"

"Never mind that now. Hurry!"

Graetha breathed hard, trying to keep up with him. Hand in hand, they fled through the streets brimming with excited, war-maddened mobs. The latest news was beginning to flow in. There had been "incidents!" It

would not be long now. Terror and melodrama made a dissonant chord, rising in crescendo to a tragic climax. All military spacecraft had been mobilized, ordered out, alerted. The rumor was that civilian spaceflights would be embargoed at once.

"We must get there before," said Garstin.

The girl sobbed for breath. "Where?"

"The spaceport. I have a spacer waiting . . ."

III

Hot Trail

Seventy hours out from Titan, Garstin watched a thin strip of charged metallic ribbon unreeled and feed through the automatic pilot. He had set for as sharp a tangential orbit as he dared. On a screen above the controls was projected a large-scale chart, constantly shifting as the robot pilot selected the course. One punched buttons, the rest was up to the mechanism. At rare intervals, Garstin took over to trim orbit, making manual corrections and adjustments, comparing the visual charts with notes, praying that the chronograph was synchronized to split seconds of accuracy.

Graetha Lantz, still pale and

nervous, brought him food and coffee. She sat in silence and watched him eat. Garstin was aware to her every movement, her very mood.

He looked at her and laughed uneasily. "I know," he said. "I don't say we can trust each other, but you'll have to co-operate if we're going to find Themis. General location and approximate orbit is easy. We haven't enough details on timing, unless you're still holding out on me. Not that I blame you, but—"

A curious smile twisted her lips. "Fair enough," she admitted. "I am cautious . . . after everything. Father calculated an exact rhythmic interval in the reported appearances of Themis. Its orbit interlocks with our normal time-plane. At this time of Saturnian year, the moon exists in our time-plane for only a brief interval, a period of not more than seven hours."

"Time enough, maybe," he granted. "But my figures are all hypothetical and terrifyingly inexact. We're following a parallel orbit now, but I don't dare get too close. At the speed we're traveling, we could splash all over Themis if we miscalculated when it bounces suddenly out of its private dimension."

"Father took that chance . . .

the first time," she said, with a penetrating glance at Garstin.

"We're taking it now, he threw at her in exasperation. "Is it necessary?"

"No." She fished into the private recesses of her tattered clothing for a scrap of paper. "Here, then. Farlane and Dazell don't have this. It may save us time."

Garstin breathed easier. "An hour here can cover a lot of territory. Do you think your friends can find the place?"

Graetha nodded. "Yes, with what they knew and what I told them. There is more risk, and it may take them longer, but they said they could—"

Graetha stared through the visiport at a black vault filled with cold, unwinking points of light. The spacer seemed to hang motionless, its speed imperceptible in the dark emptiness. In eerie silence, save when the mass detectors whined and acted automatically to repel drifting meteoric fragments, time passed. Inhabited worlds seemed infinitely remote. Even the stars were alien. The girl shivered.

"Farlane said it might be months before we could leave . . . if we found Themis."

"That's a cheerful thought. I hope you're good company." He stopped as anger darkened her eyes.

"You're as bad as they are," she said viciously. "Farlane wanted to marry me. I think he just wanted to make sure of a share in those valuable drugs they said father stole."

"I'm cheaper," Garstin offered.

"You haven't said what you want," she challenged.

"I'll tell your father . . . if we find him. If not, it won't cost you anything."

Dissatisfied, she let silence grow between them.

Red blinker alarms on the panel beat a staccato of lights. Shrill clamors of sound joined in.

"It might be an asteroid—a big one," Garstin cried, going into action with the manual controls.

"No asteroid. Look!"

Ahead, to the left, was an expanse of shimmering light, a circle of unsteady radiance. It was a pale, ghostly, unreal, a disk crossed by eerie shadow-streaks. Still unsubstantial, it permitted the brighter stars to shine right through it. But it was growing denser, more opaque, more spherical, by the passing second. "Themis!" came in hoarse whisper from the girl.

Garstin angled toward it as sharply as centrifugal force would permit. The wandering moon moved swiftly against a

backdrop pattern of stars. It would be painfully easy to overshoot. He tried to gauge his velocity and temper it to overtake the moon without an excess of speed. Unless both velocity and orbit could be matched closely, a long and dangerous approach would be necessary. Time was vital, and a series of braking orbits would consume too much, besides being almost too delicate an operation for a single pilot to manage safely.

Too swiftly, the sidelighted face of the moon expanded, and tensely, Garstin watched and calculated, applying power to the forward jets, decelerating at perilous rates. Realizing that he was overshooting, he tightened the orbit, shaving it into a hard curve as the sphere of light hurtled past. At the far end of the ellipse, as inertia wrenched at the spacer, deceleration shock made pinwheels of agony in Garstin's brain. Half-conscious, he closed the orbit momentarily into a circle, then dragged it into a steep, swiftly descending spiral. Savage desolation whirled beneath the spacer like an unrolling map. He closed in for a landing, "if the ship held together . . . and landing were possible on the lost moon of the fables.

"It's larger than I thought," he gasped, sick with the awful

struggle. "Mass too slight for solid rock. Must be a gigantic bubble of lava-rock."

"Where can we land?" asked Graetha. She was sick and weak from deceleration pangs, badly shaken physically and mentally. Her voice seemed oddly distorted by the artificial atmosphere in the spacer's cabin.

"We don't," Garstin answered sharply. "Not unless there's a smoother place."

Dubiously, he studied the ragged terrain streaming past below. Serrated peaks rose from a jumbled wasteland of broken, calcined rock. Nothing moved on the airless surface. Shadows painted solid patterns on the harsh grayness. The spacer cleared a jagged ridge. Beyond was a flat area, artificial, a prepared landing field.

Circling, still at high speed, Garstin brought the spacer back over the field. It looked safe enough. Along one side of the cleared area were plastic prefabs, flat and blocklike, set in a cluster around a huge domed building of native stone. With the forward braking jets blasting, Garstin took the ship down in a shallow corkscrew for a closer look.

This must be Lantz's secret laboratory.

Landing skids screamed on naked rock as the ship set down

hard. Merciless jolting racked the craft as Garstin maneuvered toward the buildings.

"I'll get spacesuits ready," Graetha offered.

From a locker, Garstin got blaster guns. Graetha struggled into a clumsy spacesuit. He helped her, then fitted the plastic fishbowl helmet and tightened down the lugs. Donning his, suiting unaided was a task. He handed her a gun, and his voice came faint and thready through the intercom headphones.

"There's a good chance your friends may show up . . ."

Graetha nodded. She snapped the holstered gun to her belt-clip. Something in the gesture depressed her. Now that the moment was at hand, she found herself curiously reluctant to face what they might find in the laboratory. Surely if her father lived, he would have found some way to communicate. Why had he renounced the society of his fellow men, to bury himself here in this desolation? To what end had he stolen the quantities of valuable drugs? Had his mind broken with failure and frustration, or had his experiments taken a form too vast and terrible even for him? Did he still live? How could a man's soul survive the solitudes and pitiless desolation of this nightmarish moon?

She remembered the kindly, thoughtful but absent-minded man who had presided over her childhood. Hounded, preoccupied, but always ready with time and patience for the trials of her lonely adolescence. What could be left of this scholarly dreamer, with the soaring hopes and ambitions which had led him to defy the law and the traditions of science? For every man, great or small, there is a breaking point. Had her father found his here?

Outside the ship, walking was difficult. She turned her mind from vain reverie to the necessities of action. Magnetic shoesoles clung precariously to the bare rock surface. Gravity so slight was no real assistance. Even the light was treacherous. They moved slowly, carefully, conscious of both physical and mental effort.

Smaller buildings proved mere sheds, used only for storage of materials and equipment. Pressing on, Garstin motioned toward the large stone building. A cylindrical, metal airlock pierced its nearer wall. The outer door was open. They entered and closed the outer door. Automatic machinery whined, whirled, pressured air whistled into the valve. As pressure equalized, the inner door slid silently aside.

Within was flooding brilliance

of light, revealing an immense workroom. It was circular and seemed more an access room to a mine than a laboratory. The dome housed a mass of intricate machinery; beneath it, suspended into the opening of a titanic shaft, was a closed cage of lustrous green metal. About the room were complexes of machinery, gigantic vats, control panels, gauges, tangles of wiring, banks of vacuum tubes, batteries, generators. There was no sign of life.

Garstin tested the atmosphere, then cautiously removed his fishbowl helmet. The air was sweet and pure, but over-rich in heady oxygen. He helped Graetha unfasten her helmet. Subdued, he said as gently as possible, "Not much use looking further. I was afraid of this."

"Why?" she asked simply.

"I didn't want to tell you until we made sure. Just as we came down to land, I spotted something. Another ship, smashed to bits. Just beyond the first bulge of hills. I'm afraid he—your father—miscalculated his landing. Even an experienced pilot can come to grief in a mess like that. Probably suffering from deceleration shock when he made his try. Don't take it too hard. It's usually quick and painless. May be it's for the best, this

way. Easier than trying to explain or make a deal."

Unnoticed, the inner door of the airlock slid shut, like the closing of a baited trap . . .

"Couldn't we look around at least?" the girl pleaded.

Garstin agreed with a shrug. "If you like. But don't build your hopes—"

From the elevator cage came a curious sound, not quite a human voice, not completely mechanical. Something moved, came shambling toward the man and girl. Instinctively, Graetha clung to Garstin in wordless fear.

The creature was manlike, but not a man. It shone with a dull metallic luster. It moved with sinuous glide, soundlessly.

"Don't be frightened," Garstin said nervously. "It's just a robot. An obsolete model. One of your father's, probably. I can put it out of action if necessary."

The robot advanced slowly. Again it spoke. Voice and tone were flat, metallic, words coming in dull monotone as if tentacles of remote and alien thought groped with unfamiliar symbols. Most of the words were unrecognizable as language. One word stood out clearly.

"Come!"

Grotesque in her cumbersome

spacesuit, Graetha ran toward the robot, reaching out to it.

"It's Tono," she said. "He should know me. He was devoted to father. Try to remember me, Tono. Graetha."

In the metallic eyes was a cold glare. The manlike thing evaded Graetha, drew back, gestured toward the elevator. "Come," it repeated tonelessly. "There is much to do. He is waiting. A long time, he has waited. We are glad you have come."

Stunned, uncomprehending, Graetha stared. A thought leaped in her mind. "Father," she said. "He must be here. We will find him. Come on."

Garstin's gloved hand caught her arm. "It's useless. Your robot's memory patterns are burnt out. It's been too long. I'll go with him first, alone."

"No, no!" she shrielled in protest. "I'm coming along. If my father is here, alive, I want to be the first to see him."

Garstin grumbled. "Perhaps you're right. We'd better not divide our forces, in case Farlane and his pal show up. But don't waste too much time with this robot. We still have to locate the stolen drugs; load up and take off. There's not too much time as it is."

"I want only to find my father," she said.

Following the robot, they ap-

proached the elevator cage. A clattering sound from inside the closed airlock valve startled Garstin. He glanced quickly toward the new menace. There came a sharp hissing sound as air pumped into the chamber.

"Farlane and Dazell," he snapped. "Quick, get out of sight. They must not find us here."

None of the oddments of machinery offered much possibility of shelter. The suspended elevator cage caught his eye.

"Into the cage!" he ordered swiftly. "It's our best chance. Hurry!"

Boosting the girl up, he clambered after her. With ponderous agility, the robot joined them. No controls were visible. Their weight in the cage disturbed some delicate balance. The cradling support rods receded smoothly into channel-sockets. Like a plummet, the cage dropped.

Rocket-swift, the mechanism descended the shaft. Polished rock-walls dissolved upward in whirling blurs. Desperately, Garstin searched for some kind of controls. There were none; no panels, no buttons to push, no manual levers. Everything must be automatic. He hoped luridly that the brakes, too, were automatic, that they still worked enough to check the nauseating

plunge. Air shrieked about the hurtling cage in shrill crescendoes as speed increased.

Suddenly the brakes acted. The cage slowed, shuddered, and a whine of friction-bit metal stunned the ears. The cage rode a cushion of compressed air to the bottom of the shaft and stopped with such violence that man and girl were flung to the floor.

It stopped in nightmare . . .

IV

Robot Moon

Like the domed shaft-house far above, this chamber was rudely circular, but much larger. Walls here were clearer, less cluttered with titanic machines and complexes of wiring. It was lighted with harsh glare flooding from concealed sources in the vaulted ceiling. Hewn from solid rock, this room was vast and echoing. Set into the walls at regular intervals, like niches in a temple, were gigantic alcoves filled with—

Materials of nightmare.

Monstrous, moving entities crawled and squirmed and flowed in constant shape-changes. It was a museum of horrors, as if the most monstrous of imaginable life-forms had been scoured from all

parts of the inhabited galaxies. The creatures lived, fought, writhed, overflowing from their alcoves and spewing in hideous tangles across the floor toward the elevator.

Screaming, Graetha struggled to her feet, staring wildly. The cage door opened, tauntingly, daring the venturous ones to descend from its sanctuary. Garstin leaped to his feet and wrenched at the door, trying vainly to close it. Brushing him aside, the robot strode heavily from the cage, across the platform, and directly among the writhing pit-spawns. He walked straight through them, as a material body moves through smoke.

Garstin gasped, caught Graetha to him, comforting her, calming her hysteria.

"Look!" he directed. "They aren't real."

"Aren't real?" she echoed. "Then why do they seem so solid, so tangible? What are they?"

Garstin shuddered. "I don't know, exactly. Phantasms. I've heard of hypnotic mind-warps that make you see or imagine things that aren't there. Probably set here to guard something. Maybe this is what the legendary Martian spacemen found here. Small wonder they got away as quickly as possible.

Every weird beast of mythology, and others too *outré* for the human mind to imagine. I wonder who set them here . . ."

Leaving the elevator, they moved into the room. The fearful images yielded passage, but it required extreme mental effort to force a way through seemingly solid horrors.

"Where is Tono?" Graetha asked suddenly. In the confusion of moving figures, they had lost sight of the robot. Circling the polished rock walls, they tried to locate the metal-man. Halting, they tried vainly to hear his footsteps. Their guide had vanished.

Overlarge doorways led from the central chamber into surrounding darkness. One door seemed very like another. It was impossible to guess down which Tono had gone. Without warning, the elevator cage clicked and whirled. Before Garstin could reach it, the door slid shut, and the cage ascended rapidly. It was gone from sight almost instantly.

"We're trapped here," Garstin said steadily. "Your friends know we're here. They must have seen our ship outside. Now they'll come down after us. I don't like the idea of going down any further—"

"Neither do I," Graetha ad-

mitted. "But my father must be here. We must explore till we find him."

"That may not be so easy," Garstin warned soberly. "If we pick the wrong passageway, we could wander a lifetime in a maze of caverns. No telling what we might run into."

"But if we stay here, Farlane and Dazell will find us. They will kill us and force father to give up the drugs. Probably kill him, too. They'll be expecting us here. We can't surprise them. As you told me, we haven't much to lose. Can you even work that elevator to get us back up?"

"Maybe. It must be some system of balanced weights. Given time, I could figure it out. But you're right. We'll be no worse off further down. Pick your doorway."

At random, they tried two of the passages. Each time, their explorations came to a dead end, and disheartened, they retraced their steps to the central chamber. On the third attempt, patience and determination was rewarded. An unmarked passage led gradually downward. They followed it until it levelled off, far below, into a series of chambers with numerous side-tunnels. One apartment seemed to have been lived in, though a powdery rime of metallic dust

covered everything. The place was richly furnished, but in a style utterly unsuited to human habitation. Even the decoration was alien in both color and pattern.

Choking silvery dust rose in clouds about Garstin and Graetha as they wandered curiously from cell to cell, keeping careful note of their passage, so as not to lose the way back. Dismayed by the passage of time, Garstin was about to suggest giving up the search. Then came awful discovery:

The strange object was a man, or what had once been a man. In a cradling block of molded plastic, webbed tightly by a pulsing intricacy of machinery, lay a shrunken creature, malformed and loathsome, like a mocking caricature of the human form. Oddly, it reminded Garstin of the throned mummies of ancient kings—but there was difference. This thing, withered and corpse-like, still lived after a dreadful fashion. Feeding it were countless hairthin tubes of metal, and a moving cagework compressed the chest at regular intervals as if inducing respiration. Boneless and dessicated, the nude body was caked with metallic dust and from a distance, it shone with the same dulled lustre as a robot.

Grotesque and horrible as it

was, there remained semblance of human form. Graetha Lantz recognized something in the horror. She would have run and clasped it in her arms, but Garstin barred her way, held her firmly.

"Wait!" he protested. "You can't know. You're only hurting yourself. Imagining things. Whatever that is, it's not the father you knew. It's no longer even a man. Nothing human could live in such condition."

"Father," she pleaded brokenly. "He's alive . . ."

Garstin tried to be kind. "But not as a man. A kind of robot, perhaps. It's a dead thing, Graetha. A corpse, operated by outside mechanisms. The robots keep alive a broken body. It's not a man now, Graetha. Hardly even a robot. A dead thing, re-animated by robots . . ."

The corpse spoke. Sound of its voice was worse than madness. An artificial voice, speaking at the will of an alien force, unhuman, detached, emotionless.

"The body is dead, yes. Blind and paralyzed. But the brain lives. Lives on, waiting, praying for someone to come. Someone who can understand. Someone brave enough to act without regard to consequences. Someone to carry out the mission at which I failed." It was like lis-

tening to something preserved in a jar.

Graetha was silent, stunned. Garstin spoke. "What can we do for you?"

"Nothing for me. It is years too late. Many Earth-years too late. As you have said, I am no longer even a man. But so long as memory lasts, there is something of identity. I was a man. My work in certain fields of science was well-known. Surely the name of Lantz must be remembered in the world of men. I was Dr. Theon Lantz, formerly of Earth and Mars. That does not matter. Nor am I concerned with who you are. Listen to me—"

The worst of nightmare was still to come. It began with husks of sound from the lips of a semi-animate corpse, with the thoughts and memories imprisoned in a sentient brain that lived in the midst of death. It ended, violently, in a vision transcending space and time . . .

"Thought is a force," said the brain that had been Dr. Lantz, "a force, electrical in nature, as tangible as light, heat, sound. The living brain is a device for creating and utilizing this force. With proper instruments, one can detect and measure the flow of the subtlest brain-currents. In our crude and cumbersome way, we try to

duplicate this device, we construct intricate machines by which to imitate these functions of the brain. We synthesize brain tissue, we build electronic calculators, we study the living colloids, but for most purposes, our synthetic brains are poor substitutes.

"This was my work. I had some success, but always my dreams were greater than the realization. I hoped to create an artificial brain that would equal or exceed the natural brain. I failed, but during my experiments, I detected a force similar in wavelength to that of thought, but of immeasurably greater intensity. It seemed to exist generally, ebbing and flowing in strength, following a curious cycle. It emanated from an unknown source, as if broadcast. My instruments showed that it was not identical with thought-force as we knew it, but closely parallel. I studied this mysterious broadcast, and determined to find the center from which it radiated.

"This, I did, eventually, after many false starts and curious disappointments. With highly sensitive detectors, and devices like radio location-finders, I tracked this electro-magnetic impulse to its source. My search led me to a sector near the planet Saturn, and my graphs

showed a constantly moving source, following a path like a gigantic ellipse, roughly like an orbit for a Saturnian moon. To my dismay, I learned that this orbit corresponded, with that of no known moon of Saturn. Then, delving into old and discredited charts, I discovered that a tenth satellite had presumably existed. Themis, the phantom moon, discovered and lost many times, often reported, yet unsurveyed, its very existence listed by authorities as a delusion of astronomers.

"Imagine my wild excitement when I checked the supposed orbit of this mythical moon, and found that it approximated that of my graphed ellipse! Here was the source of my mystery radiations, and Themis became a greater enigma than before.

"Themis became a madness to me. I searched out and followed every possible clue, and beggared myself in the work. With electronic calculators, I solved every hypothetical problem relating to the moon, located its orbit exactly, its periods, even worked out an equation to account for its unstable existence in our space-time continuum. I plotted courses and solved the delicate timing required to find Themis during any part of its existence in our time-plane. At last I carried my quest to the

logical conclusion. Alone, in a spaceship, I landed on the desolate surface of Themis, found the shaft leading downward, and explored the depths of this haunted moon. What I found—will come later.

"To understand, one must go back beyond the dawn of time and space as we know it. In a parallel time-plane, no longer existing, there lived a great race. Totally unhuman, they inhabited a star-and-planet system not unlike ours. But our civilization resembles theirs only as a child's clockwork toy resembles an electronic calculator. We stumble and grope at the foot of the ladder of evolution. They had reached its upper rungs. But their galaxy was dying. They were a doomed race.

"Foreseeing their end, they sought a strange kind of immortality. At the pinnacle of their development, in the face of race-death, they sought to preserve their inconceivable knowledge and their cultural dreams for the future. With limitless power and knowledge at their disposal, they fixed upon a small, uninhabited planet, hollowed it, and made of its vast interior a receptacle for all the concepts, the emotions, the processes which were the sum of their race-life. This repository was a master-brain, gigantic,

self-contained, powered for practical eternities with atomic energies, sustained by automatically prepared synthetics, served by robot machinery.

"By ordinary standards, it was meant to be eternal. So vast is its power, so invulnerable its structure, that it can be destroyed by no means known to man. And lest it share in their own destruction they sundered it from their time plane, sent it reeling in perpetual unbalance to exist partially in one plane, partially in another. It is suspended in the nebulous warps between space-time continuums and ranges pendulum-wise between two parallel planes.

"They wrought well, those scientific priest-wizards, for Themis has outlasted their cosmos. Poised in the void, existing only for brief periods in either plane, it has become a phantom. Themis is a ghost moon, in more than one sense. It is the mocking graveyard of a race's hopes and ideals.

"The race failed, for the seeds of its own decay lived on in its greatest creation. In the latter days, as stars died, great plagues devastated those inhabited worlds. Without the germ-killing effects of sunlight, diseases multiplied. And their master-brain, synthetic though it was, became infected. It is a

sick brain, tortured and delirious for unthinkable eons, unable to die, unable to think clearly. In its immortal agonies, it radiates storms of thought impulses, the raging nightmare of hate and fear that are its deliriums.

"For many months I lived here. At first I was haunted by the dreadful phantasms that people this tiny world. Later, during its more lucid moments, I could communicate with the master-brain. From it I learned many things, staggering concepts far beyond man's most soaring imagination. But in the midst of visual and aural hallucination, I began to fear for my own sanity. Perhaps I was actually deranged. Returning to my own people, I expanded my studies. I hoped to learn something of medicine, in my arrogant dream of curing the brain, restoring it to health. My great hope lay in antibiotics, one science unknown to the creators of the brain.

"At times, I spoke unguardedly, mistakenly revealing a few of the scientific facts learned from the master brain. For this, I was scorned and ridiculed. My discoveries and new-found knowledge was misunderstood, jeered. I was ousted from scientific fraternities. In the last analysis, the pontiffs of tradi-

tional science are as bigoted as those of superstition. My name became a byword, but I buried myself in studies and experiments, ignored my tormentors.

"On Themis, I had isolated the most virulent germ-groups that afflicted the brain. They were not dissimilar to our common disease germs, and in test tubes, they yielded to ordinary antibiotics. I had discussed the possibility with the brain, during one of its periods of partial sanity. It approved, and agreed to the experiment. There was risk, of course. Even if the medicines proved effective against the disease, they might be toxic to the brain.

"My work had impoverished me. I was discredited, disgraced, my name a mockery. To obtain the needed drugs, I had to steal them. I did not hesitate, but set about diverting a shipload of valuable drugs to my use. A crime, perhaps, but I was long past such small considerations.

"Alas! I was too inexperienced a spaceman. Inertia-shock deadened my muscles, slowed my reactions. In landing on Themis, I wrecked the ship. Because the brain remembered me, found some solace in the presence of another thinking being, I was brought in by the robots. As you see, my shattered, dying body was set into a working

cage, forced to breathe, kept functioning. Like the brain, I live on synthetic nourishment, my blood is purified artificially by chemicals. My brain is forced to live in a dead body.

"The drugs were salvaged, brought down the shaft into the deep caverns by robots. But the brain was master now. During my absence, it had changed the thought patterns of even my own robots. They no longer answered to my will. And the brain had forgotten too much. Its deliriums had returned. Alone here, more dead than alive, I have held on, hoping and praying that someone would come. Another to carry out the treatment I planned. Someone to dump the drugs into the brain's feeding vats and end its diseased nightmares. I am helpless, but there is still a chance . . ."

The voice stopped gratefully. In the echoing silence, man and girl stood dumbly, unable to think clearly, scarcely capable of feeling.

Imagination reeled before the cosmic images of Lantz's story. Garstin and Graetha had listened, entranced. Belief was a different matter. One could not accept such facts easily. Both source and setting made acceptance difficult. If this shattered being were really Lantz, and the scientist's living brain

spoke through the dead lips, how could they be sure that his privations and sufferings had not deranged his mind. Was there a great brain somewhere within the hollow heart of Themis? Or was not the whole fantastic thought a mere reflection of Lantz's own madness.

Garstin's mind shrank from the problem of the revelations.

"What chance?" he asked numbly. "Why is it so necessary to treat and cure the brain.

"Why!" answered the voice tonelessly. "Because the brain, though mad, is still a potent force in our universe. Haven't you guessed? It is a titanic hypnotic device. The vital strength and corrupt wavelengths of its deranged thinking upsets a balance. It disrupts and confuses the race-mind of mankind. There is an obvious connection between the periodic appearances of Themis and the mass hysteria and madness in our own race. During the regular cycles of Themis' existence in our plane, nations, races, planets go individually and collectively insane. They indulge in holocausts of mass-crime. They endure periodic outbreaks of mass-fear, mass-hysteria, mass-murder. They wage war upon each other.

"Ultimately, war is complete destruction. It corrupts, ruins

both victor and vanquished. This is but one result of the brain's delirious thought-waves. Hypnotically, men's ideals are warped, forced into tangents, influenced into the patterns of insanity—directed toward inevitable destruction, to the ruin of civilization. If this evil continues, the race of mankind is doomed . . ."

Again, for long moments, Garstin meditated in silence. Again, the concept was too great for him. His mind revolted at acceptance.

"Do you mean, that if the treatment was effective, and the brain recovered its sanity, that all wars would cease?"

This time the hesitation was in the brain of Lantz. "No," he said slowly. "Not completely. During the periods of non-existence, when Themis is outside our dimension, there is peace. At best, it is precarious, since the after-effects of war linger long, and hatreds die slowly. But there is comparative peace. There would be no swift miracle. Man is too set in his habit and unsound instincts. Individuals would still go mad. Change would come slowly, naturally. In the past, there have been noble attempts to substitute reason and arbitration for violence. To some extent these

have succeeded, for individuals. Never for nations. But in time, freed of the evil influences of the brain, there will be more attempts. They will succeed. Slowly and certainly, reason and goodwill must triumph. Is not such an end worth any risk?"

Badly shaken, Garstin found words difficult. Grappling with the abstract magnitudes of Lantz's story, he found unwilling belief growing in his mind. There was no certainty. He fumbled with his own thoughts and emotions. Suddenly, desperately, he wanted to believe.

Graetha Lantz found speech for both of them. "This could be the greatest thing that ever happened," she said. Eyes shining, she extended her hands to Garstin in a gesture of instinctive trust and comradeship. "We must believe. You did not know my father."

Garstin's reason tried lamely to follow her swift intuition. "I am not convinced," he protested. "If true, it would be worth any risk, any sacrifice. But—"

"I can convince you," said the voice in flat, metallic accents.

There were minute directions, a carefully laid-out route to a certain chamber. There were cautions. And finally:

"There you will find the drugs, beside a hopper that leads to the

main feeding vats. The floor is a great lens. Look through it. When you have seen, I leave decision in your hands . . ." After a pause, "If you decide as I hope, leave quickly. Return to your ship and put space between you and Themis. There is no telling what may happen when the brain realizes what it has become. It may destroy itself, and Themis with it . . ."

V

Nightmare

Garstin and Graetha remained for one more question.

"What about you?" they asked, almost in a single voice.

Still devoid of emotion, the voice of Lantz's brain replied:

"My work is finished. I will be dead before you have reached your decision. The future is in your hands . . ."

Following directions, they located an immense funnel-shaped well leading downward. Circling it was a steep, spiralled ramp. Huddling the rough walls, they went down as rapidly as safety permitted. Graetha Lantz led the way, while Garstin kept sharp watch behind. In depths below, thick mists swirled and eddied, closing over the trembling pair as they descended. Behind and ahead, ramp and walls

were visible for short distances; beyond that, isolating them as it seemed to move with them, was dense curtains of blinding mist.

Suddenly the ramp ended. They stood on the level bottom of an immense pit hollowed from solid rock. Here were more machines, of totally alien function and design, unrelated in appearance to those of the upper levels. All were idle, neglected, crusted with silvery dust. But there was murmurous sound and slight mechanical jarring, as if the great floor echoed some rhythmic vibration far below.

Neatly stacked, beside a tremendous hopper leading into a chute, were the stolen medicines. Some packaging had burst, and spills of dull, powdery gold laid treasure trails upon the bare floor. Treasure, indeed!

In the center of the room, yards across, was a curved flatness like polished crystal. Dulled now by the all-pervading dust, some vagrant drafts had whipped small areas clean and swept the dust into rifled heaps. Garstin knelt beside the curb, brushing at the dirty surface with his fingers. The flatness became clear, transparent. Within it gleamed luminous myriads of prisoned atoms. Graetha joined him, mopping at the glossiness with the ruin of her skirt. Window, or lens, looked into hell . . .

They stood above an abyss reaching into the hollow moon-heart of Themis. Distance lost itself in depth, the inner vastness was a throbbing murk veined with brilliance. There was a light of all colors, prismatic, bursting with vibrant life.

Man and girl knelt beside the crystalline pool, staring into its magic.

Dazed sight explored slowly. Then monstrousness and singing beauty of color took form. Circling the hollow sphere, crusting the concave surfaces, were titanic constructions, city-size. Patterns seemed familiar, but sanity recoiled from obvious significance. Most of the gigantic moon-heart was a quivering mass of living plasm and delicate machinery. It was an artificial brain, with reclaimed living matter grafted cunningly into organic unity with batteries of electronic calculators. The scale was staggering, the complexities infinite. Here was cybernetics on the cosmic level, as if gods had played at invention.

Now Garstin could make out huge power-plants furnishing energy in various forms, pumping stations built to supply oceans of fluid life to the wonder. He was aware of the flow of thought, as one may be in dreams. Tidal flares of luminous

force rippling over the glistening convolutions seemed real and visible. He sensed a throbbing might of atomic engines powering the unthinkable intricacies, transmuting stored energies into involved chemistries and electrical impulses.

Above and beyond, he was even more dreadfully aware of the being itself; the entity, partially alive, drowsing in delirium, still functioning. Mind-force beat at his consciousness in waves of fearful energy, transmitting thunderous thoughts, eery moods, terrible whims, transient memories, manifesting the cosmic evil of its madness. Stark awake, he dreamed. Monstrous vibrations of alien thought crashed overwhelmingly upon the barriers of his mind, broke down defenses, hammered unholy symbols into the inner citadel of his brain.

Vicarious, his mind yielded to distant times and places, to another space, a void within which no stars bloomed their fire-flowers on the fields of eternal light. Then there was chaos and new beginnings. In agonies of dislocation, familiar space-time vanished. Into whirlpools of vacuity went knowledge of self, of his identity as a man. Pinpoints of light in nameless spectrums reeled into momentary existence, became smears of

vague color, spiralling. Fearful energies blasted, and chaos became order for a time, only to sweep back into the dark unknowns again. Sounds that were all sounds which have ever existed made thin harmonies against the eternal silence.

Garstin struggled to repel the mind-horror. It broke. Stirs of shadowy reality rifted the gray diffusion. Again, he knelt by the crystal pool, knew the ugly magic of its depths. Wrenching his sight and consciousness from its fearful lure, he stood up, caught Graetha and dragged her with him from the lens. Her eyes stared blankly, sightless and mindless. Slowly, horror faded in them and personality came back.

Garstin knew now what he must do. There was never a real decision. Regardless of cost to himself, regardless of the fact that his failure to recover the fortunes in drugs would make him a hunted fugitive, regardless of the fact that the time he could stay alive would be brief and bloody, he must act. No risk was too great. No sacrifice . . .

The future was in his hands . . .

Long afterward, they fled upward. Forcing Graetha ahead of him, since she moved with

drunken unsteadiness, he ran up the ramp, through the apartments, now devoid of life, with the thing on the plastic block relaxed into the peace of death. Breathlessly, they raced through tortuous corridors, then up the inclined passageway leading toward the central shaft-room. All about them, the solid rock-walls seemed to stir and pulse with alien life. Blasts of cool, fresh air moaned through the cavern mazes. Into the central chamber they stumbled, thrusting a way among seething phantoms.

The elevator cage was down, resting solidly on the floor of the shaft. Its doors were closed, barricaded, as if against the hordes of nightmare. Harsh and deadly came a voice from the barricaded cage. Two heads thrust out, and two hands bearing blaster guns.

"Stand where you are!" shouted Farlane. "Don't move to reach for the gun, or we'll shoot. Whoever you are, we're moving in. Claiming everything."

Garstin had forgotten mere human menace. He checked in mid-stride. There was no time for thought, for temporizing. He acted on instinct. With a single movement, he hurled Graetha behind a bank of heavy machinery, then threw himself flat in the dust. Blaster beams licked

out as he squirmed, rolled and crawled to partial safety. In deafening uproar the shaft-room rocked. Rock chips deluged Garstin, but Farlane and Dazell had lost their advantage. It was deadlock.

From the safety of the barricaded cage, Farlane addressed Garstin.

"We'll make a deal," he offered. "Your life, and the girl's. We get the drugs. Which do you want most—the jack or the jill?"

Garstin laughed bitterly. "You can have my share of the drugs."

"Is that all right with you?" Farlane called to Graetha.

"I never claimed a share," she responded icily. "But I know you too well. This is just a trick to get us into the open. Don't trust either of them, Rocky."

"Don't argue with them," Dazell raged. "Rush him, and shoot him. The girl will tell us where the drugs are."

"I'll tell you now," she taunted savagely. "They're gone. The drugs have been used. You're both fools—"

Garstin made sudden movement, showed himself as if trying to dodge to more substantial cover. Startled, Farlane and Dazell exposed themselves, trying for a clear shot. The moment was enough.

From behind her shelter of machinery Graetha Lantz took careful aim, triggered her gun. Blossoms of seething flame wreathed Farlane, exploded. Dazell fired quickly, and the block of heavy equipment sheltering the girl erupted in fusing metallic chaos. Garstin's blaster echoed the flash. Dazell vaporized in blinding ferments of fire. The cavern rocked and thundered, and it was over with shocking suddenness.

Graetha Lantz stepped clear of the wreckage. "I had not thought I could kill a man," she said weakly. She wanted to faint, but something in Garstin's face made her hang to consciousness. "We had to kill them, didn't we?"

Garstin shrugged with painful memory. "Sometimes being in the right doesn't help. Such habits come from associating with murders . . . like me."

"You! But you're practically a policeman?"

"Not quite, as I told you. Just an ex-investigator for the insurance company. Fired. Fugitive murderer. Wanted on Mars on an M-1 charge. Without the money I hoped to salvage from regaining those drugs, I can't even buy justice. I'm finished."

"But after what you've done, who—"

"Who would believe it? Imagine me in court with such a wild fantasy! It's no use. I wouldn't even try to tell about it. Men like your father and me carry our doom with us. Thieves, murderers—we just need a hole to crawl into. It never works out. I'll try to get you to a safe place, then let the hounds come after me. It'll be fun while I last. Come on."

Roughly, Garstin bundled her into the cage. Some cautious experimentation solved the problem of operating the mechanism. With a shriek of displaced air, the cage careened upward. In the domed room at the shaft-head, there was a colossal hum of activity. Curious machinery functioned at high speed, indicator panels seemed to have gone mad. Tremors rippled the stone floor. A gauge burst in a shower of breaking glass and metal. Radiation counters set up a buzzing like angry bee-swarms.

In panic haste, Garstin fitted Graetha's space armor, donned his own, then thrust her into the airlock. Atmosphere hissed out, froze into fine crystals and settled instantaneously. Across the desolation, Garstin hustled the girl toward the spacer. Crowding behind the manual controls, he woke atomjets to roaring life, and eased the ship carefully off the rugged ground. They were

none too soon. Visible paroxysms ran through the moon's crust, became steady jarring vibrations. Long cracks appeared, widened.

Themis fell away behind them. Ahead yawned darkness stippled with stars in familiar constellations. Garstin increased acceleration as much as he dared. Maelstroms of nauseating pain and blankness of mind and body claimed both of them. It cleared slowly. With the controls set on automatic, he relaxed while they helped each other out of the bulky garments and the fishbowl helmets.

"Where are you taking me?" Graetha asked, giving him an odd glance.

"That's a good question," he admitted. "I wish I had as good an answer. I'll think of some place."

She was silent, then slid into the control seat beside him. Her hand sought his arm.

"If you're planning to dump me somewhere safe, and then run off to die alone like a hunted animal, I won't have it," she said. "Pick a big hole to hide in, because you'll have company."

Garstin frowned in exasperation. "Don't be a sentimental fool. There's no hole big enough. Nice try, though. And

don't try to tell me you're in love with me."

"I don't know. Maybe not, yet. But give me a little time to get used to the idea—"

Far behind the ship, the sky opened in soundless, instantaneous flash. Where Themis had been was nothing, as if the moon had wasted its potential atomic energy in a second of radiant splendor. Space warped, stretched, tore wide open. In-visible, titanic forces struck the spacer, swatted it in senseless rage. For a long moment, Garstin knew vast multiples of space and time, then blackness and whirling convulsions, time-wrenching terror.

There was void, then suddenly a universe again. Sol was gone, and Saturn, Jupiter, and all the other familiar planets. There was a sun, though, and attendant light-flakes that were planets, and beyond loomed a

galaxy of alien, unfamiliar constellations.

Graetha screamed. Even Garstin cried out.

"I don't know where we are," he tried to explain. "In another time-plane, I guess . . ."

Calmly, Graetha accepted the facts. There would be no getting back. She smiled cryptically. "Maybe there are people like us here. We'll find them, make a home. It settles one problem. You're stuck with me. Give me a chance to repair my make-up, and you won't mind so much . . ."

"Go ahead," Garstin told her. "We have all the time there is."

He set a course toward the nearest planet and fitted the tape into the automatic pilot. Mentally he began composing a postcard to Doggy Peters, but decided in time that there would be too much difficulty about mailing it . . .

Coming up next in ROCKET STORIES will be a line-up of even better tales—naturally so, since we've had more time in which to read, sift, examine and obtain manuscripts, and to judge by your letters just what you want. But there will also be another major change. You'll notice a new approach in the editorial, and a new development in the stories themselves. We think you'll be pleased with the results. And if you want to find out what we're talking about, we suggest that it might be wise to take a look at the next issue and see for yourself. If you've enjoyed the issues before and have liked this one, you'll be sure to find the next issue even more down your alley!

UNDERESTIMATION

BY ALGER ROMÉ

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

Never underestimate the power of a woman, they told him. But when he found the bedraggled waif stowed away on the miserable little ship to Mars, he knew what was waiting for her out there. And he knew she'd underestimated a lot of things.

RAM—E/M 3 lifted grays from Flushing Spaceport and headed Marsward. When the last jet cut out, the girl staggered into the control room. The sound of her unsteady footsteps, together with her sick moan, spun Gerris back from the manual control board.

"No!"

"Fraid so," the girl said. She wiped a smear of blood away from her nostrils and grinned at him.

Gerris cursed under his breath. "I suppose you know the law on stowaways?" he said, grimacing.

"Uh-huh. So either push me out the airlock or turn around and land me." Despite the fact that her face was gray and her knees were obviously trembling,

the grin widened into a challenge.

Gerris's expression had nothing in it of either laughter or response. His mouth set itself in a narrow line.

"Obviously, you don't know just exactly what kind of a fix you're in," he said. "Do you know where this ship's headed?"

"Haven't got the faintest idea, Handsome," the girl said, leaning against a bulkhead. "I don't care much, either. Anything's better than the House of Correction. I wasn't doing any picking and choosing when I hit the field last night, believe me."

Gerris frowned. "This ship is officially designated as 'Robot and/or Manual — Earth/Mars Vessel Number 3.' It's intended for robot operation at least nine-



ty percent of the time. She's not equipped with full manual controls. All I can do is duck away from a meteor, or make a few other minor course changes. What's more, there's no airlock. I can't turn around, and I can't push you out without wasting a shipful of air. Does that make you happy?"

"Sure does."

For the first time, Gerris smiled—a tough, ironical twitch of his lips. "How much do you know about the setup on Mars?"

"Not a damn thing. Got a cigarette?"

"You have a talent for by-passing the significant and proceeding forcefully to the irrelevant, haven't you?" Gerris threw her his pack.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever seen me clean out a till," the girl replied, flashing the same challenging grin.

In spite of himself, Gerris laughed. The girl broke into a laugh of her own, throwing her head back and parting her lips away from her teeth. Something about the self-confident way in which her hands rode her hips called to a yearning that should have been obscured by the thought of a wife and two children waiting in Marsdome. Perhaps because of this, Gerris's laugh became a stern frown.

"Listen—"

"Marilyn."

"Listen, Marilyn, you don't seem to understand what you've gotten into."

"Look, Handsome, I don't care what I've gotten into. What counts is what I'm out of, and that I'm getting farther away from Earth every minute." The wild, laughing light that never left her eyes completely, brightened again. "What's more, on a ship with a very cute pilot. The situation bids fair to be one of the most pleasant in months." She did not change her position against the bulkhead, but the effect was the same as if she moved over to him and run her hand down his cheek.

He coughed and shifted his weight. "I'll have you know I'm married," he said, conscious of his sham dignity. "Not only that, I've got two children. Moreover, I'm a meteorologist, and I've been one long enough to sublimate any wild urges into involved monographs on altocirrus cloud formations."

Marilyn raised an eyebrow. "Maybe," she said. "On the other hand, you just might be getting bored with it all." She studied his face. "In fact—"

She moved up and kissed him with her mouth open and her arms tight. Gerris found himself looking at her short, copper-

colored hair with surprisingly limpid eyes.

Marilyn moved her head until it rested against his shoulder. "Altocirrus clouds, huh?" she murmured. "Put that in your monograph and publish it."

Gerris had not been kissed in that way for some years. He discovered that a violent reaction was taking place within him. He turned back to the controls with an abrupt twist of his body. "Let's cut that out right now," he said harshly.

"Anything you say, Handsome." Marilyn said, her tone of voice implying precisely the opposite. She blew smoke against the back of his head. "What's your name, lover?" she asked.

"James Gerris." He pushed his face against the binocular periscope eyepiece. His fingers were shaking.

"That James Gerris, huh? You are weather-controlling Mars, or something, aren't you?"

"I'm drawing up a tentative plan for an experimental attempt on a local scale, if that's what you mean, yes."

"Well, I am in distinguished company."

"You're going to be in a lot more of it. In fact, you're going to be extremely close to it." He was as much intrigued by the thought as he was apprehensive.

"How do you mean?"

"Just what do you know about conditions on Mars?" he asked. "Damn little. In fact, all I know is that you people on the research staff live in a pressurized dome, and that the twenty adults and few-odd kids of you are all the life there is on Mars."

Gerris twitched his mouth. "It doesn't sound so bad, when you say it fast, that way. Actually, if you had any idea of what it's like to live in a dome, you'd know how appalling it was."

"How so?"

"The entire operation is strictly from shoestring. U of K's a rich school, but even so, it's terrifically expensive to maintain the dome. Do you have any idea of what it's costing, just to keep an atmosphere in this ship, heat it, air-condition it, stock it with food, and run a course with no kinks in it a human being couldn't stand, at an acceleration below the human critical level? It's roughly double what robot operation costs. It takes three months to set up authorization for a human passenger."

"And that's just an example. The dome itself is about as far removed from a luxury hotel as it can get. It's split up into two lobes, with the pile in the center. One lobe is crammed full of labs.

The other one has ten cubicles in it. Each couple, and their children if they have any, lives in one cubicle. Space is so limited that the larger families sleep in shifts."

He turned around to see Marilyn's reaction. She was displaying no sign of any emotion, or understanding. "That doesn't leave me much room, does it?" she said casually.

Gerris smiled grimly. "It leaves you *no* room. Every inch of space is taken up. We live like pigeons in a bank of coops."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'll sleep in the ship."

"No, you won't. The supplies'll be unloaded the minute we land, our samples and reports will be stowed aboard, and the ship reset to automatic control. She'll take off again in about six hours."

"Rig me a shelter somewhere, then. I don't care."

"Rig you a shelter? Out of what—cornflakes boxes? We haven't got any structural materials to spare, and the windstorms will knock anything else flat. Besides, how'd you insulate it? Or are you planning to requisition some of our oxygen to keep a fire going at night? To say nothing of keeping a mask on all the time."

This time, it seemed to penetrate. "There must be some-

place for me!" Marilyn said petulantly, grinding her cigarette out on the deck with an angry twist of her foot.

"Sure. Right on top of the pile."

Gerris sighed. "Honey, you got yourself into this. All the vamping in the world isn't going to change the fact that there is simply no room for you." He shook his head in frustration. "Don't worry about it, though. Once we land, twenty highly trained minds are going to have to drop everything else and devote themselves entirely to solving your problem for you."

Marilyn's expression brightened, and she raised her hand to push back a strand of hair.

"Sex appeal has nothing to do with it," Gerris said.

"No?"

"No. It just so happens that we'd have to do the same even if you were a hundred and fifty years old and were on your fifth set of false teeth." He cracked his knuckles savagely. "You see, woman, we can't send you back for three months, at the soonest."

"You can't send me back, period. If you think you can, just try it." Her blue eyes sparkled angrily.

"When we can, we will, even if it means all of us have to hold

you down and strap you in. But before we do, we've got to get authorization to run a human-amenable course and passage. I told you that was a tough proposition."

"Fine. The longer it takes, the better."

"God! No wonder you landed in a reformatory! What a brain—or rather, lack of one!" Gerris clenched a fist and sighed in frustrated anger. "Can't you understand the basic difficulty? There simply isn't any place to put you! You can't stay on the ship, you can't stay in the dome, you can't stay on the surface of Mars, and you can't return to Earth." He made an angry sound in his throat. "I don't know what we're going to do with you."

Marilyn had had time to recover her shell of bravado. "I know," she said.

"What?"

"I'll marry one of the men."

Gerris stared at her incredulously. Hadn't she understood, when he described life in the dome? Probably not, he decided. "You'll have to arrange a divorce from his wife, first," he said.

That one staggered the girl for only a minute. She cocked an eyebrow and grinned maliciously. "I might just do that."

"It still wouldn't solve the problem of finding room for you."

"Hell, it wouldn't. You'd have to figure out what to do with his ex-wife, though." She smiled broadly, and looked Gerris over. "I might consider raising the kids myself," she said.

Gerris spent a restless eight hours in the control chair while Marilyn slept in the single bunk. He would drop off to sleep for a few minutes, then wake up again, his brain churning.

Life on Mars had been hard, and presented a constant battle for survival. Working under those conditions was almost inconceivably difficult—far different from calculations and deductions arrived at in the sheltered quiet of an Earthside lab. Reports and analyses of preliminary data, too, were more easily accomplished in a hidden office than in a cubicle apartment with two young children to furnish distraction.

All that, however, was in the line of duty. His skill and training were designed to overcome just such obstacles.

The problem of Marilyn was something else again. The girl was attractive—he stirred uneasily in the chair—and her impact on the male members of the dome staff would have behind it the combined shock of a new female face, after two to four years of contact with no strange

women, and the friction which would undoubtedly be set off immediately between bemused husbands and jealous wives. Particularly if Marilyn actually did make room for herself by what, admittedly, was the best method he could think of, from a practical standpoint. If the girl did set her cap for one of the men . . . He felt a quiver of dread.

He banged his hand on the chair's arm in frustration. No matter what happened, it was obvious that the staff would be completely disrupted as any sort of an effective research unit.

He cursed aloud, wondering if Marilyn had meant it when she implied that he was the object of her intentions. Gerris was not accustomed to kidding himself—he could very easily be attracted to the girl, without necessarily losing any affection for his wife. He wondered, however, if he could stand up before the concentrated attack Marilyn could undoubtedly institute, and stand up to it well enough to preserve his home.

He pushed himself out of the chair and took his wife's picture from his wallet.

"I love my wife, but Oh You Kid!" Marilyn jeered from behind him.

He spun around, pushing the photograph into his pocket.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!"

Marilyn laughed. "Okay, Simon Pure. Okay. But don't forget to look at wifey's snapshot once in a while, just to keep your morale up."

"Go on back to your cabin." Gerris was badly frightened. Marilyn apparently slept in her underwear.

She grinned lazily. "Sure, I just wondered what you were doing out here, all by yourself and lonely."

"I was thinking of a way to get rid of you," he snapped.

"Fat chance, Handsome." She turned slowly and walked away. As she reached the companionway, she looked back over her shoulder. "But remember—never underestimate the power of a woman." She stepped into the companionway and disappeared from sight.

The last day of the passage finally came, and Gerris was a sleepless wreck. Whenever he dozed off, he was liable to be awakened by the feel of Marilyn's mouth against his lips. When they ate at the one food-unit on the ship, her thigh would press his. He was haunted by the devilish twinkle in her eyes.

When the ship completed turn-over, he was grateful for the excuse it gave him to order the

girl to strap herself into the bunk. He lashed himself into the control chair with a definite thankfulness that a few more hours would see them landed, with the problem at least partially off his hands.

Mars filled the periscope lens, rushed up, resolved from a red haze to a patch of dun ground blotted by vegetation, and finally became the blast-obsured surface of the ravaged landing area. The ship rocked into quiescence, and Gerris cut the switches with a sigh of relief.

He climbed down to Marilyn's cabin and unstrapped her "Come on, Bombshell. Let's get it over with." He picked up his suitcase, handed Marilyn a spare mask, and slipped his own down over his nose and mouth. "Just breathe naturally," he said, his voice rattling through the filter. "The valve'll adjust to Mars pressure automatically."

"Never fear, Handsome. I always breathe naturally. It's you that pants once in a while."

"Can't you relax for a minute?" he said wearily. He could picture the look that was going to be on his wife's face.

"*Stowaway, huh?*" Margaret would say, two lines appearing at the corners of her nostrils. "Ah—huh."

Carson, the nominal chief of the dome's staff, would clamp

down hard on the pipe he couldn't smoke outside, but jammed through his mask's filter anyway. "*Well, what're you going to do about her?*" he'd say, and then it would be up to Gerris to admit he didn't know, and throw the problem to the entire staff. No matter what happened, he wouldn't be very popular on Mars any more. He doubted if any of the women would ever speak to him again.

"Well, let's go, lover," Marilyn said. Her jawbones showed behind the mask's edges as she grinned.

"All right." He led her to the hatch, opened it, and dropped the folding ladder. They climbed down, into the cup formed by the semicircle of people who had come out of the dome when the ship landed. The scientists—male and female—stared at Marilyn as she stood there, enjoying the situation. Gerris could feel the awkward expression on his face.

His wife stepped forward.

"Hello, Madge," he said.

"Hello."

"I—"

"Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Uh—sorry. Marilyn, this is Madge. My wife, Madge—Marilyn."

Margaret took Marilyn's hand. "How do you do?"

Marilyn said "How do you

do?" Gerris noticed that some of the confidence in her voice was wavering.

"I didn't know there was a new staff member coming in on the ship," Margaret said.

"This—uh—that is, Marilyn isn't exactly a staff member. She—well..." He explained the situation as rapidly as possible. Margaret wrinkled her brow. She looked over at Marilyn, who was posing prettily.

Margaret turned and took one of the other women by the arm. The woman—Carson's wife—was looking from Marilyn to a slightly dazed Carson with a cryptic expression on her face. The two women moved away from the rest of the group for a moment, held a low-voiced consultation, and returned.

"It's all fixed," Margaret said brightly.

Gerris was astonished. "How? Where're you going to put her?" he asked, knowing that merely finding a place for Marilyn to

stay wasn't solving more than half the problem.

"Phil Carson's going to move into our cubicle with you. I'll move in with June—they don't have any children, thank God—and Marilyn moves in with us. One of us will have to sleep in the daytime, of course, but two of us will be awake—" She smiled meaningfully under her mask. "Marilyn, and either June or myself."

"Well, I'll be damned," Gerris said. "That's it!" And it was. Until they got authorization to ship the girl back, she'd either be asleep or in the constant company of one of the women.

"Never underestimate the power of a woman," he said in an awed voice. "I never thought of that!"

That fixes everything, he thought happily. Things are fine.

He kept right on thinking so, until the first time he tried to kiss his wife.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY

BY KIRBY BROOKS

They came down to investigate the strange planet and to find that there was life there—life and science. What was it, then, that drove the creatures insane before communication could be established.

The spaceship was in effect stopped. Stopped, that is, in relation to the smaller ship, as the velocity had been matched exactly. The planet below was spinning at an apparently dizzy rate however, because both ships were in a stable orbit and at a fixed distance from the surface. The large ship inched closer. Shard, the pilot, was hunched forward, staring fixedly at the tiny one. He was actually using nothing but gravity to bring them together because the chances of a hard bump were less that way. He thought ruefully of the first time he had ever attempted contact in space. Something on the order of a carom-shot. His teeth still rattled in imagination.

"Shard," the co-pilot said. "Do you suppose that ship is from

the surface of this planet?"

Shard was puzzled. "I don't know, Cray. The little time we've been in this system is hardly enough to tell. I think the chances are good that it is though, even though we haven't recorded or detected any signs of a technology advanced enough for space travel."

Cray glanced worriedly out of the port at the approaching small ship. "I wonder what sort of creatures are in it? And I wonder why they didn't answer our all-wave signals? I wonder if . . . ?"

Shard cut him off. "Cray, I think you'd better check the magnetic grapples. As nearly as I can tell we should make contact very shortly."

Cray floated out of the co-pilot's position and eased him-

One new movement in the magazine field has spread like wildfire. The small-sized 10¢ magazines that can be read in a few minutes have reached a size of audience that's phenomenal. It's a real pleasure, therefore, to find that two of them are paying considerable attention to science fiction and its relation to today's living. HE and DARE, the new vest-pocket magazines, have been featuring the facts of science and science fiction regularly, and plan to continue doing so. Science fiction readers should take a look for themselves, we feel.

self back into the center cargo section of the ship. He checked the grapples and called Shard on the interphone. "Everything is all right here, and I can see the little ship through the port . . . we're almost touching right now. Shall I energize the grapples?"

At that moment there was a small bump, then a little later another, as if a lime and a grapefruit hanging on long strings were swung together. There was that much difference in size. Cray cut on the magnetic grapples and caught the small ship right after the second bump. With a thud and a scrape it came to rest against the hatch.

Shard and Cray in airtight suits sealed off the cargo space and opened the hatch. The small ship would just barely come through. They wrestled it into an improvised cradle where it could be tied down solidly against acceleration forces. After replacing the air and crawling out of their suits they examined it thoroughly.

Surely it was a spaceship, Shard thought, although nothing like their own. Metal, yes, but where theirs was completely spherical, it was an ellipsoid, and where theirs had no outward appendages at all, the little ship not only had holes which were obviously rocket tail-pipes, but

vanes for controlling flight in air. A very strange contraption indeed.

At about the same moment they both became aware of slight sounds coming from the little ship.

"Do you hear that?" Cray cried, excitedly. "There is something in the ship! It does carry passengers!"

"I can't see anything through this front port," Shard said, putting his head close. "It seems to be some sort of substance that allows light to pass only one way. Do you see the entrance port anywhere?"

As Shard was talking, he had been feeling the different seams at the front of their prize, and Cray had been busily engaged examining the rest of it.

"No, I can't find anything that looks like a door . . . no . . . It's right under here, Shard. We set it down on the entrance port! Here, let's turn it over."

In a weightless condition, it was no trouble to roll the small ship over, and at this movement the noise within got noticeably louder. Sure enough, there was what was obviously a door. But such a small thing! Neither Shard nor Cray could possibly get more than their heads through it. Surely the inhabitants of the planet below, if

they came from there, were very, very small. Why, Shard thought, possibly no more than a third normal height if that door was any indication.

Both became aware now of the increased sounds from within. It sounded like . . . yes! It must be speech! But why did the little door not open? Were they perhaps testing the air in the big ship? Were they afraid to open it and face their "captors"? Or was the door jammed? The chattering and thumping continued unabated.

"Do you think we should try to open it?" Cray asked, nervously. "Do you think our air would be poisonous to them?"

Shard shrugged in disgust. "Don't you remember your own tests of this planet's atmosphere? It's almost exactly like ours. Their air won't be poisonous." Of all the co-pilots, thought Shard, grimly, I am assigned one that would jump at his own voice.

Cray looked ashamed. "I forgot for a moment." Then a sudden thought: "But what if they aren't from this planet? What then?"

Shard shrugged in defeat. "All right, let's put on our suits."

After getting back into the suits they turned their microphone pickups on for air-conduct-

ed speech. Struck by a sudden thought, Shard leaned over, placed his microphone on the hull of the small ship and turned the gain up high. The sounds inside were clearly audible now. And it certainly sounded like speech! Excited, screaming speech!

"It sounds to me as if whoever is in here is having trouble of some sort," Shard said, motioning for Cray to listen. "What does it sound like to you?"

Cray listened for a moment. "Why, it sounds like they're almost hysterical. Do we dare try to open it so we can help them?"

"I think we'd better, and soon, too," Shard nodded. "Can you see how to open it?"

After several minutes of fumbling with what appeared to be a recessed handle of some sort, the small door started to move. A puff of vapor wisped out around the edges and immediately formed frost crystals around the crack. The door swung inward. As the crack widened, the sounds became louder and louder until the cargo space of the big ship was practically reverberating to the bedlam. Shard and Cray drew back in wonder as the door opened wide. They watched intently and rather fearfully as the screaming sounds continued unabated from the dark interior. Were

the occupants hurt? Why didn't they come out? Were they perhaps afraid?

Suddenly, a furry brown ball exploded through the small hatch! Shard and Cray jumped in fright, and being weightless, banged against the ceiling with a crash! Then a second brown ball shot out of the hatch, straight toward them. Shard was horrified when it hit him with a thud! Right in his face plate were two sharp, bright eyes, staring at him. With a quick movement he brushed the creature away, and as he did he had a fleeting glimpse of four appendages with a round head placed between two of them. The quick thought crossed his mind that that was probably the top part of these creatures.

Cray's voice caught his attention just then. It was cracking with fright. "Shard! Shard! What are these things? Let's get out of here! Let's go back to the control room! Get this thing off of me!"

Shard looked around, saw Cray floating along toward the control room door, trying in vain to scrape off, literally, the other furry creature. It was clinging with all four of its appendages tightly wrapped around his head, and screaming with ear-shattering volume. Shard suddenly remembered his headphone volume

and toned it down. Even then his ears were ringing with the racket. Seeing Cray still in difficulty, he pushed off and helped him dislodge it. The added push of sending the creature sailing away thudded them both into the control room door. As the creatures were thrashing about madly, bouncing off floor, walls and ceiling, they had little trouble slipping through and slamming the door. After shucking out of their suits they both collapsed in their seats.

"Oooh!" Cray panted. "I've never had a fright like that before! What were they trying to do?"

"I don't know," answered Shard, thoughtfully. "But I think they were more frightened of us than we are of them. Did you ever hear such noise? As near as I can tell, they're hysterical." And going to the door he peered through the little window. "Let's see if we can calm them down enough to communicate."

Several sleep periods later Shard heaved a sigh of disgust. "Cray, in all the time I have been on Exploration Patrol, I have never run into anything like this. Why, these creatures are so unstable emotionally they can't even understand a simple thing like putting one object

with another like object and getting the answer 'two'. How could a race that has the technology to build a spaceship like that, break down so completely?"

"And over nothing, really," Cray answered. "It looks to me as if they are permanently deranged. Why, they haven't ceased that gibbering since they came out of the ship."

"I guess we'll just have to report that through technical difficulties we were unable to communicate," Shard sighed, fully.

In a heavy concrete pillbox, sitting next to a heat-scarred patch of desert, Joe Roberts got out of his chair in front of the radar screen. He yawned, stretched, scratched his stomach

and smacked his lips. "By golly, Jimmy, I'm glad to see you . . . I'm sleepy."

"Any luck?" Jimmy asked, as he slipped into the operator's seat.

"Nah . . . just the same old false pips now and then," Joe muttered sleepily. "You reckon that new fuel blew the thing to pieces?"

"Well, it could have," Jimmy said, squinting closely at the screen. "Or, it could have blown it right out into an orbit. That fuel metering system was new too. Nobody was sure how it'd act. That's why so many of the rocket scientists were against using monkeys on a first flight."

"Yeah, poor little things," Joe mused. "I got kinda attached to 'em. Hope they're all right."

C. M. Kornbluth is a name more than merely well-known to readers of science fiction. He's known for two things: a sharp, incisive style that carries a real wallop; and the ability to think things through and always to have something worth saying behind every story. This certainly holds true for his latest novel, *THE SYNDICS*, which is scheduled to appear in *SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES*, beginning with the November issue (on sale early in September).

This is based on the simple assumption that criminals are those beyond the law; but should a group of criminals, racketeers, etc., take over the government, they then cease to be criminals—they are the law, and hence cannot be beyond the law. Crime is what the society doesn't theoretically permit—and when a whole society is based on the criminal ethic and morality, then you have a cockeyed type of respectability. Also a fine story.

DAY'S WORK

BY NOEL LOOMIS

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

He came striding across the galaxies with feet that spanned eons as well as parsecs, and with a goal in his mind—the goal of a creation forbidden by members of the Council of the Gods. He wanted to create a certain kind of biped!

Two of the gods had been arguing all morning. A galactic morning, that is—one sixth of the time it took Betelgeuse to complete its orbit around the circumference of a cross-section of the spiral whorl of the sprawling IX Galaxy—some four hundred and twenty thousand years.

And the fury of the last nova explosion indicated that Mogar, ranking member of the IX Galactic Council, was becoming annoyed over his failure to browbeat Dalen, who had come up from the LIII Constellation Committee only a few eons before.

But finally, just before noon, Mogar's tremendous thought-force thundered at the younger god out of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud and rolled across ninety

thought light-years of space to the constellation Bootes, where Dalen was trying to settle a territorial dispute between two solar system deputies who had been involved for eighteen centuries over the jurisdiction of a newly formed binary system.

Mogar's thought-force said: "Your theories are preposterous and repellent. No entity in physical shape can ever learn to live a useful life. For one thing, they seldom evolve the quality of infinite age. And records will show that in all the II Super-galaxy no species of biped with an opposed thumb has ever been able to live peacefully with itself. All such species are self-destructive."

A great rumbling came from the Cloud, accompanied by trillion mile streams of sullen fire,



and then Mogar's thought-force, muttered but still understandable at that distance, came again:

"When you have been in the Council long enough to become oriented, you will see that these ideas of yours are nothing but sentiment, and have no place in a council of the gods."

The energy-nucleus that was Dalen absorbed these thoughts, and at length sent his answer back to the Cloud:—

"Sire, your venerable age and your seniority on the Galactic Council cause me to answer you with deep respect, but I find it impossible to agree."

Mogar's thought returned like cosmic lightning: "Then you will, I suppose, appeal to the Supergalactic Conference."

Dalen evaded this trap. His answer swept back across the light-years of the galaxy's length quietly but strongly:

"Sire, I do not think that is necessary."

And of course it was not necessary. While all the nine gods in the Galactic Council had authority in any part of the galaxy, and even certain rights anywhere in the Milk Way Supergalaxy, in practice each member of the council ruled a particular sphere of the galaxy, and by unwritten law might do anything he wished in that re-

gion as long as he did not upset the dynamic balance of neighbor regions.

That was where Mogar came in, and why it was necessary to secure his approval before actually beginning the experiment. For Mogar's ancient seniority on the council and his resultant familiarity with all conditions in the Galaxy of Orion (the IXth) had made him a sort of deputy of the Supergalactic Conference, and they had actually given him a temporary appointment as Director of Creation in the IX Galaxy. Temporary, though he had already held it for several ages. The higher gods were very conservative.

So it was most desirable to secure Mogar's approval on any project involving creation, for creation involved the welfare of neighboring regions. But Mogar, long embittered by his own failure to advance beyond the Galactic Council, valued the small eminence his appointment gave him, and had adopted a policy of conservatism as his best means of preserving it. Therefore he could be expected to oppose on principle any experiment the failure or success of which might upset the dynamic balance of the galaxy and throw a shadow on his judgment, and the successes of which could only re-

act favorably to the god who should bring it about.

Dalen considered Mogar's opposition for the century-long space of a galactic heart-beat. This wasn't a good start for Dalen to make in the council.

It was well known throughout the entire IV Universe that Mogar was old and crochety, perhaps even vindictive. Those very weaknesses had long ago cost Mogar a seat in the Supergalactic Conference, but that wasn't the worst of it. If Mogar had progressed in the usual fashion from the last Beginning, he would by now have had a seat in the mighty Cosmic Chamber.

So the situation exhibited still more serious aspects. Mogar, having seen many younger gods pass him in the long climb upward through the several eternities from the last Beginning, consistently delighted in showing younger gods their place, and under the Laws of Hierarchy, a younger god who lost face would be relegated to some quiet Constellation Committee until the next End and reorganization of the Cosmos. Mogar was known to throw obstacles in the way of every young and ambitious god, and then watch them sharply for a chance to catch them off-guard.

Dalen knew these things. He had been warned by his friend,

the middle-aged god Lennat, who had been one of Mogar's early victims. Lennat had lost a test of strength with Mogar and had been assigned to the obscure constellation, Trachon, where there had not been even a nova explosion for more eons than Dalen could remember.

Dalen considered these things, and he knew what billions of years of inactivity could do to a god's mind. Even now he felt the lightly restraining touch of Lennat's thought-force, a little dulled by long disuse. He felt grateful for Lennat's interest, and yet he had an idea that was more than just that—it was an ideal.

Dalen wanted to see a species evolve that could temper intelligence with sentiment.

Dalen's belief was that intelligence alone, even the unusually high forms developed by certain Arachnids and some Centipeds, was not the most pleasing form of life. He believed that sentiment—even though unsupported in logic—had a definite place in the cosmic aim of finally conjunctive symbiosis, because it provided the most comfortable form of relationship, and there no longer was any argument even among the gods that comfort was the Ultimate Aim.

So Dalen wished to give such

an entity an opportunity to evolve. He knew there would be definite limitations. For one thing, there could be only two forms: avian or mammalian.

The birds and the mammals were the only two forms that developed a great deal of conjunctive feeling, and so his choice was necessarily limited to them. He preferred avian for its ability to leave a solid surface, but he liked mammalian for its inevitable eagerness to develop an opposed thumb. And the opposed thumb, Dalen believed, was the quickest answer to any sort of technical progress.

Some of the gods held that technical progress was undesirable, that any form of life would more quickly evolve into the abstract forms such as pure energy, thought-force, and so on, if they should lack technical ability. But Dalen saw desirable things in technics, as he saw desirable things in sentiment, and he had been determined for several ages that he would some day put his theory into effect.

Just now Dalen hesitated, not because he was afraid, but from caution stirred by his knowledge of Mogar's ancient shrewdness. Mogar mistook his hesitation for weakness, and his next thought rolled powerfully and triumphantly from the Magellanic Galaxy, across the inter-

vening vacuum, back to the IXth and through its length to Bootes again:

"Then, perhaps, you will challenge me."

Dalen perceived the note of condescension. He knew that Mogar had challenged many ambitious young gods, and had never lost a test, but still Dalen did not rise to the taunt.

"No, sire, I am not at this time going to challenge you," Dalen answered evenly.

Mogar's guffaw thundered across the intergalactic void.

But Dalen had not been elected to the council from the committee of the Constellation Hercules for his caution. At once he reached out to the other galaxy with his sensitive perceptive faculties and probed lightly at Mogar's mind.

Dalen recently had begun to suspect that the elder god had retained some of the lower mind-centers that were distinctly ungodlike. Now was a chance to find out. But almost as soon as Dalen tried, he was chagrined. He touched one of the intricately convoluted hyper-centers, but it was shielded.

That was embarrassing. Mogar would know that he had tried, and by evening every god on the council would know that the newcomer from the LIII

Constellation Committee had tried to probe old Mogar's mind and had failed. But Dalen was not a god to back away from his chosen course.

He felt that his power was somewhat diminished by the unusual distance, for Mogar was visiting outside his own galaxy today. Dalen channeled his energy through the fifth-dimension space-warp, which offered zero resistance, and in traversing the long parsecs of the galaxy, he gained six years in time before he reached the point in the galaxy nearest Mogar in the Cloud. There he halted and struck suddenly and with all the normal power of his faculties at the depths of Mogar's mind.

He hit first the reflexive center, but there he met a solid wall of force, and then, because he could shift his probing lance faster than Mogar could erect shields, he stabbed at what would have been Mogar's instinctive level. He was astounded to find that, too, protected.

Dalen had expected to find the lower centers unguarded, because it required untold trillions of macro-ergs of energy to erect a single shield, and Mogar would spend centuries replenishing that energy from atomic dissolution. But also because attempting to probe an elder god's mind was an audacious thing, and

Dalen had not expected Mogar would anticipate it.

But Mogar had, and was taking no chance. Dalen did not hesitate. He had committed himself, so he stabbed again, and this time with tremendous power. He funneled his probing force through the spiral time-warp of the sixth dimension, to give it infinitely compounded power, and with all this inconceivable kinetic momentum he stabbed repeatedly at successively lower layers of the elder's mind, far past the instinctive and even into the inanimate—but without success.

By now he was ashamed. The newcomer was now only a smart aleck. But Dalen had not finished. How the elder god at his age could endure the awful energy-drain of completely shielding himself was more than Dalen could understand. What Dalen did understand by now was that Mogar definitely would not allow anyone to penetrate his mind.

That was a shock as Dalen realized the implications. Why should a god shield his mind-centers at such a frightful cost of energy? There could be but one answer, and it frightened Dalen a little. It meant that Mogar *did* have disjunctive thoughts and perhaps even feelings. It meant that even if

Mogar should withdraw his opposition nominally, he would be glad to see the experiment fail, and he might even help it to fail.

That would be a vicious handicap for Dalen. The evolution of a race was subject to many perils; evolving a particular species was a hot-house sort of process that would take several billion years and much careful nurturing. If another god should be opposed, he could destroy the entire experiment, for instance, by dropping a spore of some malignant virus into the midst of the species—a virus for which the race would be unprepared and against which it would have no resistance. That was only one of infinite ways to eliminate an undesirable species.

So now it was obvious to Dalen that his only recourse was to break down the barriers to Mogar's mind. He had not intended this, but Mogar was forcing it. If he did break through the shields, then Mogar himself would be relegated, for the entire supergalaxy would know it instantly.

So now Dalen, having unintentionally worked himself into a spot where it was relegation for one or the other, gathered his energy. There was one way in which he felt positive that he could break through Mogar's protection, even at this great

distance. This was by way of the ninth-dimension elliptical spiral. Dalen had never used it, for it was prohibited to any god below the council, but if he could manipulate it into operation he could combine it with the sixth and his infinitely compounded power would be also infinitely squared.

There was one drawback. According to Dalen's calculations, a combination of the sixth and the ninth would require an output on Dalen's part of power to the extent of something like 8.4 times ten to the twentieth power macro-ergs—and that would be Dalen's last effort. He would have to rest for a while after that. If it didn't succeed, he reflected, there would be eternities to rest.

He concentrated his energy facilities and spiraled them to full power, sucking the last quantum of pure energy from every available atom, even stripping binding energy, and poured it all into his utilization of the two dimensions. Dalen was a young god and a strong god, and it was utterly inconceivable that any god could stand up against that enormous combination of power.

By now the entire IV Universe knew that he and Mogar were fighting it out. Tightness pervaded Dalen's thought-force

which was flung out along the edge of the galaxy. The mighty power of the two dimensions swirled together and lashed out across the interstellar void, gathering momentum as it traveled in ever-increasing spurts.

Perhaps the very first tongue of this energy touched Mogar, when unexpectedly his chuckle—a little forced, it seemed to Dalen—rolled back across the void. He said, as if amused:

"Where do you propose to hold this experiment?"

Dalen relaxed gratefully and allowed the controls to ease from his mind-centers. So Mogar had enough. Mogar had backed down. Only an old god of long seniority could do that without losing face, and also, Dalen understood, that was Mogar's only way out. Dalen knew now that he would have broken through, and in a way he wished he had. It would have eliminated Mogar's future unofficial opposition. But Mogar had chosen to break the deadlock, and that was Mogar's right, so Dalen accepted the gesture.

"I intend to develop a new solar system, to be known as the XXXVI, out on the fringe of the galaxy, and attached for administrative purposes to my home Constellation Hercules. I will choose one of those planets, sire, to be populated."

Mogar snorted so loudly it could be heard in the VIII Galaxy. "It will take you two billion years to get a biped. I say give the planet a shower of germanium isotope rays and everything but insects will kill themselves off quickly. Then in a few million years you will have an insect civilization to be proud of."

But Dalen was firm in his answer. "No, sire. I believe the opposed-thumb biped may prove to be a very desirable life-form. This planet will be only one of ten quadrillion in the Milky Way Super-Galaxy. I think it is not too extravagant to use it as an experiment. It is under the jurisdiction of my home constellation, sire," he said pointedly.

Now Mogar grumbled, and a billion cubic parsecs of cosmic dust exploded before his ire and streamed into the vacuum of intergalactic space. "Very well, then. I withdraw my opposition. But you will see that I am right, and at next week's meeting I shall expect a report from you on the outcome."

"Yes, sire," Dalen said respectfully. He turned in the space between two stars, and began traveling back toward Hercules. He felt now the astonishment in the minds of Lennat and the seven members of the council. Yes, Dalen was au-

dacious. He was young and perhaps impetuous, to brave the wrath of a god like Mogar. Dalen knew now that the other members of the council felt as he did, that Mogar would go to any length to prevent Dalen's success with the experiment.

Dalen resolved more firmly that it should succeed, but it was a heavy load that he bore as he made arrangements for two stars to meet in the outer void of the IX Galaxy. His realization of the difficulties ahead was lightened by only one thought: If he could create the race he wanted, he would be very proud. Even without Mogar's opposition, the odds were heavy

against him. The gods did not like to see their precedents broken.

But the one thought lightened Dalen's mind: if he should succeed, he would be very proud. No doubt it would mean his elevation to the Supergalactic Conference and perhaps even to the Dioclave. So Dalen's mind-force was busy with ideas and plans. In fact, he realized a little wryly, he was almost exuberant. He had even selected a name for his experimental species. He would call it "Man," and by this time next week the entire Supergalaxy would know whether an opposed-thumb biped could be a desirable entity.

This was a good day's work.

Fantasy has never been popular in a science fiction magazine—and justly so, we feel. Science fiction requires that the reader adjust himself to the idea that the writer is dealing with what may be possible; fantasy requires an adjustment to the known impossible for purposes of amusement at a good story.

Yet, when properly separated and honestly handled, fantasy has repeatedly proven even more popular with readers than much of science fiction. The trouble is that there has never been enough of it, and there has been a singular absence of it for the past few years.

Now we're happy to announce that the best of current fantasy fiction can be found in a magazine appropriately named simply FANTASY FICTION MAGAZINE. In the current magazine, a well-known writer and magician—Bruce Elliott—spins a lovely, wacky story of magic and magicians in a world where prestidigitation is miraculous, and real magic such as levitation is considered a routine stage trick! Plus a host of other top-flight tales of fantasy!

THE WORLD S-F CONVENTION

Philadelphia this year will put on the biggest show on Earth for those who refuse to restrict themselves to this one little planet.

The Eleventh World Science Fiction will be held there in the sumptuous Bellevue-Stratford Hotel over Labor Day Weekend—September 5, 6 and 7.

This year, there's going to be a definitely fan-slanted event. The readers will meet all the leading professionals and editors, writers, publishers, etc. But it will be a convention for the fans—because that includes all the professionals who have always wanted to be considered fans themselves at these affairs.

Under the able and proven leadership of Dr. Milton A. Rothman—who we learned little doesn't hide our old friend and fellow-fan, Milt—the affair should be the best that has ever been held. It's already shaping up for a hilarious and delightful affair in every way.

Robert Bloch will share m. c. honors with Isaac Asimov—and which will win the contest for the best producer of boff-yuks is hard to determine in advance. Willy Ley has been chosen as guest of honor. And there will be a contest for short skits put on by various fan groups that should make convention history.

With all that, it's only fair that the fans—and those who don't call themselves regular fans, but who enjoy reading science fiction—should give all possible help to this affair. To do so is simple, quick, and practically painless. The convention is being run by volunteer help, of course—but publicity and advance work still requires a considerable outlay of cash. This can be supplied only by means of convention memberships.

If you'll send the sum of \$1.00 to Bob Madle, Convention Committee, Box 2019, Middle City Station, Philadelphia 3, Penna., you'll be helping in the best possible way. You'll also be helping yourself, since you'll receive your membership card and all the bulletins that will help you keep up to date, and also make sure you are prepared to enjoy your stay in Philadelphia thoroughly with the minimum of trouble.

It's a worthy cause. We've had our membership for months now, and still feel a glow of satisfaction over finding the card proving it in our wallets.

ON THE SHELVES

by

KENNETH WRIGHT

Books keep coming out at a phenomenal rate, and there's not much point in trying to keep up with most of them. There are anthologies endlessly reprinting the same old stories with new ones that are hardly out on the stands in the magazine form; there are books "discovered" from the magazines and printed, in spite of the fact that they're already twenty years out of date. And with these are always a few really good books.

We're not interested in the hordes that shouldn't have been printed. But when good ones do turn up, we're delighted to see the stories in more permanent form. Even more rarely, when something completely new and also good appears, it's a pleasure to announce it.

Recently, there has been a highly encouraging development in the publishing field. It has effected something of a major revolution in publishing as a whole, but now that the beginnings of a science fiction line has started, the revolution should be even more interesting.

Naturally, I'm referring to the BALLANTINE BOOKS plan. Here, the battle between hard-cover and paper-bound books has been settled. Both are issued at the same time, from the same plates. And the resulting savings in cost has permitted Ballantine to sell hard-cover books at the phenomenally low price of only \$1.50, while sticking to what has become almost the standard 35¢ for the paper-bound copies.

Their first venture into the science fiction field was with an anthology. But unlike most, who simply hunt around for stories that can be put together in a hurry, Frederik Pohl did a first-class job of editing here, and did it the hard way. He went out and got brand-new stories that had never been in print. He got them by top authors, and he picked good stories. (Probably the fact that Ballantine pays their authors as much as a slick magazine had something to do with the quality.)

There are fifteen stories in the book, which is entitled *STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES*; the names used indicate that there

is real meaning to the title. Asimov, Brodsky, Clarke, del Rey, Gold, Kornbluth, Kuttner and Moore, Leiber, Leinster, Merrill, Morrison, Sheekley, Simak, Tenn and Wyndham!

— Some of the stories aren't any better than can be found in a first-class issue of a magazine. On the other hand, there are some which are higher in sheer readability than can usually be found among the top current reprint anthologies. Going down the table of contents, *COUNTRY DOCTOR* by William Morrison is a top-grade story of what a space-turned doctor of the future may have to cope with. *IDEALIST* by Lester del Rey is probably his best story since the one in the Heinlein anthology. *THE NIGHT HE CRIED* by Fritz Leiber is a successful science fiction story which is also an uproariously funny take-off of a Mickey Spillone story. *CONTRACTION* by Clifford Simak is first rate Simak, with his usual richness of emotional punch. *THE MAN WITH ENGLISH* by H. L. Gold is a really nice job of refurbishing an old idea into modern form. *A WILD SURMISE* by Kuttner and Moore has a beautiful situation that is well developed up to a really lovely ending. And *THE NINE BILLION NAMES OF GOD* shows Arthur C. Clarke in a mood we see all too rarely. It's a yarn about men who have to repair the machines of the Tibetan lamas—who have installed atomic generators to power their prayer wheels!

Probably anyone else would list a different line-up of stories than this. I suspect that every tale in the book would appear on the lists of any ten men who sat down to list their favorites. So far as I know, this is the ideal arrangement for a book—one in which every taste will find some outstanding, and one that will lead to every story being outstanding to some taste.

All in all, a superb job, and one which indicates that Ballantine Books will prove to be a major addition to the science fiction publishing field.

At the usual price of anthologies, this would be a best buy; at \$1.50 for the hard-cover edition, it is a rare bargain; and at the price of 35¢ for the paper-bound edition, it is simply a miracle!

The second book issued by Ballantine Books isn't quite as spectacular, in some ways. Rather unfortunately, I feel, they have chosen a story which appeared in the magazines quite recently. This is *THE SPACE MERCHANTS*, which appeared in *Galaxy Science Fiction* as

GRAY PLANET, by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, at the same prices.

However, for those who may have read it before, it should be pointed out that the story was gone over carefully and rewritten into a tighter and more meaningful conclusion for book appearance, with considerable improvement. For those who have not read it in magazine form, it represents a sound, thoughtful introduction to science fiction and a first-rate book for inclusion in the library.

Here it might be well to point up one basic fact which does make the whole Ballantine plan one of the most important things to hit the science fiction field. A highly successful magazine will sell somewhere around 100,000 copies of an issue. But these books come nearer to 500,000 circulation. They reach an audience which ordinarily never read the magazines. And, unlike many of the paper-bound books, Ballantine has succeeded in obtaining reviews and critical attention (partly because of simultaneous hard-cover publication) which will bring them to the attention of interested readers.

As it stands, then, it's entirely possible that more potential readers may be drawn to science fiction through these books than through all the magazines—and a fair number will then turn to the magazines, provided they like what they read.

I don't think there's much question but what they will like THE SPACE MERCHANTS. The story has flaws—but the all-over effect is good enough to make it one of the better novels of the year.

Essentially, this is a story of a world where advertising has taken over the whole controlling function—politics, economics, etc. The hero is a junior leader in one of the biggest agencies—a man convinced of the rightness of things as they are, in spite of a good bit of natural intelligence. He's a product of his times, and one who sees nothing wrong with a campaign to sell Coffee-est by including a small amount of a habit-forming drug in the product. Now he's faced with the job of selling something new to the world—the colonization of Venus.

Against him is another agency, which wanted the job, and a group known as Consies, who feel that the ruthless exploitation of the planet must end, and that conservation of resources and control of population alone can save the race.

This first third of the book is an extremely penetrating and shrewd analysis of current trends in some fields. Surprisingly, it isn't just satirical; it's witty and fascinating enough to have made the advertising industry today take notice of it publicly and join openly in amusement and admiration for the job these two writers have done.

The remainder of the book can't live up to the beginning. The story continues through a logical enough series of incidents which take the hero into a peon group (or perhaps serf group is better) in a labor camp, where he really meets the "consumers" who have been mere statistics before. And by a series of nearly melodramatic escapes, it leads back to the advertising agency, with the hero's eyes slowly opening to the realities of his world.

This section is sometimes less than it could be, as if the writers were in a hurry, and didn't stop to question the change of heart on the part of the hero. The change is established as to reason—but the reader doesn't feel the change with the hero as he should; it comes about logically, but much too abruptly. And since the hero has been a sort of high-grade heel, it's almost impossible to get any satisfaction out of his final triumph of sorts, even though he has reformed.

Actually, the best work here is done on the slow disintegration of the little pilot who took the first ship to Venus and back; this is a sharply done, completely convincing piece of characterization. And brief as our meeting with him is, the figurehead President of the United States also emerges as a genuine person.

But the book remains one that can't be put down after it's begun. It has sweep, scape, and meaning—and a darned good adventure plot on top of everything else.

It's another book well worth the hard-cover price of \$1.50, and an outright steal at 35¢.

If Ballantine can keep to this level, it will be the best thing that has hit science fiction since the day when John W. Campbell first became an editor!

Oh, go out and buy the books! That's all I really meant to say in the first place.

AN ARTIST'S LIFE

BY FELIX BOYD

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

Dalgreen came back from the Moon to die, and there was only the art he knew worth living for. But then he found Di Costa, who painted as no human could . . . and whose secret was too great for any man to know.

A busman's holiday. A real busman's holiday. I stay on the moon for a year, I paint pictures there for three hundred and sixty-five days—then the first thing I do back on Earth is go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look at more paintings. Brent smiled to himself. It had better be worthwhile.

He looked up the immense stretch of granite steps. They shimmered slightly in the intense August sun. He took a deep breath and shifted the cane to his right hand. Slowly he dragged himself up the steps . . . they seemed to stretch away into the oven like infinity.

He was almost there . . . a few more steps would do it. The cane caught between two of the

steps, shifting his balance, and he was suddenly falling.

The woman standing in the shade at the top of the steps screamed. She had watched since he first climbed out of the cab. Brent Dalgreen, the famous painter, everyone recognized the tanned young face under bristly hair burned silver white by the raw radiation of space. The papers had told how his stay on the moon had weakened his muscles from low gravity. He had climbed painfully up the steps and now he was rolling helplessly down them. She screamed again and again.

They carried him into the first aid room. "Gravity weakness," he told the nurse. "I'll be all right."

She tested him for broken



bones and frowned when her hand touched his skin. She took his temperature, her eyes widened and she glanced at him with a frightened look.

"I know," he said. "It's much higher than normal. Don't let it worry you though, the fever isn't due to the fall; in fact, it's probably the other way around."

"I'll have to enter it in my report, just in case there's any trouble."

"I wish you wouldn't. I don't want the fact to leak out that I'm not as well as I should be. If you'll call Dr. Grayber in the Medical Arts Building you'll find that this condition is not new. The museum will have no worry about their responsibility as to my health."

It would make wonderful copy for the scandal sheets. "MOON PAINTER DYING . . . GIVES LIFE FOR ART." It wasn't at all like that. He had known there was danger from radiation sickness; in the beginning he had been very careful to be out in his spacesuit only the prescribed length of time. That was before he ran into the trouble.

There had been a feeling about the moon that he just couldn't capture. He had almost succeeded in one painting—then lost it again forever. It was the feeling of the haunted empty places, the stark extremes of the

plains and boulders. It was an alien sensation that had killed him before he could imprison it in oil.

The critics had thought his paintings were unique, wonderful, just what they had always thought the moon would be like. That was exactly his trouble. The airless satellite wasn't at all like that. It was *different*—so different that he could never capture the difference. Now he was going to die, a failure in the only thing he had really wanted to do.

The radiation fever was in him, eating away at his blood and bones. In a few months it would destroy him. He had been too reckless those last months, fighting against time. He had tried and failed . . . it was as simple as that.

The nurse put the phone down, frowning.

"I've checked and what you say is true, Mr. Dalgren. I won't put it in my report if that's what you want." She helped him up.

The moon was out of his thoughts later as one canvas after another swam into his vision. He bathed his senses in the collected art of the ages. This was his life, and he was enjoying it to the utmost, trying to make up for his year's absence from the world. The

Greek marbles soothed his mind and the Rembrandt portraits wakened his interest once again. He marvelled at the fact that after all the years he could still wander through these halls and have his interest recaptured. But he also wanted to see what the moderns were doing. The elevator took him to the Contemporary Wing.

Almost at once, his quiet enjoyment was broken by the painting. It was an autumn landscape, a representative example of the Classic-modern school that had been so popular for the last few years. However it had something else, an undeniable strangeness about it.

His legs were beginning to tremble again; he knew that he had better rest for a few minutes.

Brent sat on the wide lounge on the main staircase, cracking his knuckles, his mind whirling in circles as he rapidly introspected himself into a headache. There was no one thing in that painting that he could put his mental finger on, but it had upset him. It was disturbing him emotionally; something about the picture didn't quite ring true. He knew there was a logical evaluation of a painting, just as there was a logical evaluation of any material object, but that wasn't the trouble, he was sure.

Equally, there was an emotional evaluation—more of a sensation or feeling; and this was where the trouble lay. Everyone has felt pleasure or interest at one time or another when looking at any form of visual art. A magazine photo, drawing or even a well-designed building could generate an emotional pattern. Brent was attempting to analyze such a sensation now, a next to impossible job. The only coherent thought he could muster on the subject was: "There is something subtly *wrong* with that picture."

Suddenly he had the answer. It came in a second, as if revealed by some hidden source of insight. Perhaps his recent stay on the moon helped the idea to form; it had a relationship to things he had experienced there. It brought to mind the cinder plains that had never felt the foot of man. The sensation could be expressed by one word—*alienness*.

In the eternal lifelessness of the silent lunar wastes this sensation had a place. But how did it get into the polite autumn landscape? What twist in the mind of the painter enabled him to capture this strange feeling on canvas? Brent cursed himself softly. This wasn't a painting of an alien landscape. It was an Autumn in the Woods land-

scape painted by a man who didn't understand his topic. A man with an odd way of looking at things. A painter who could look at the bustling life of a fall day and capture the eternal death of a lifeless satellite.

Brent leaned forward on his cane, his heart beating in tempo with his swirling thoughts. He had to find this artist. He would talk to him, reason with him—beat him if necessary . . . he *must* find out the man's secret. The thought of his coming death sat like a cold black weight in his body. To die without knowing how to capture that sensation on canvas!

He had killed himself searching for it—to no avail. Yet all the time here on Earth was the man who had the knowledge he sought. The bitter irony of it swirled his head with madness.

The insane thoughts seeped away slowly. He sat on the couch until he was rested enough to trust himself on his feet. He had to find the man.

Down in the right hand corner of the picture in the shadow of a rock was the signature, Arthur Di Costa, printed with wide, sweeping strokes. Brent had never heard the name before but this fact was not unusual in itself. Real artists were a retiring crew. They labored in back rooms and old garages, fill-

ing canvas after canvas for their own satisfaction. Their work might never be shown until long after they were dead—dead.

That word kept intruding in his thoughts. He turned angrily and walked towards the guard who leaned casually on a sword of abstractionist sculpture.

"Shore, mister," the guard answered. "You'll find the curator in his office—the door there behind them old hangings."

"Thanks," Brent muttered, and followed the course indicated by a meaty finger. He found an alcove partially concealed by the luxurious draperies. It contained a photo-electric water fountain and a neomarle door bearing the legend, *G. Andrew Kinnent—Curator, Contemporary Wing*. He pushed open the door and stepped into the receptionist's office. She looked up from her typewriter.

"My name is Brent Dalgreen; I would like to see Mr. Kinnent."

"Not the Mr. Dalgreen! Why I . . ." The girl broke off, flustered. She leaned hard on the intercom button.

"Go right in, Mr. Dalgreen. Mr. Kinnent will be very happy to see you." But the lovely smile that accompanied the statement was wasted on him; his thoughts were elsewhere, today.

After thirty minutes of shop

talk Brent drew the conversation around to the present exhibit—and one painter in particular.

"Mr. Di Costa is one of our most brilliant young painters, yes, indeed," the curator said smugly, as if he had personally taught Costa every painting trick he knew. "He has only lived in New York a short while, but the boy has made quite a name for himself already. Here, let me give you his address, I'm sure you would enjoy meeting him. Common interests, you know."

Brent was easily talked into accepting the information he had come for in the first place. He kept his real thoughts secret from the vociferous Kinnent. They would seem more than foolish—unsupported as they were by a single shred of real evidence. He couldn't let this deter him. The sands of his life were trickling out, but there was something he had to do first.

The building was one of a hundred identical greenstone structures that had lined the streets in the fashionable Thirties. The site of the former garment center was now one of the most favored residential districts in the city. Brent stood across the street from number 34, ostensibly studying the headlines on the newsend machine.

The windowless exterior gave the obvious fact that the owner was fairly well off financially. Any information he sought would be inside—not outside. He crossed the street and stepped into the chrome entrance-way.

The inductance of his body actuated the automatic butler and the soft mechanical voice spoke from over the door.

"The Di Costa residence. May I serve you?"

"Mr. Brent Dalgreen to see Mr. Di Costa."

"I'm sorry, but I have no information regarding you, sir; if you care to leave a mess—" The robot tones stopped with a sharp click, to be replaced by a man's voice.

"I am very happy to greet you, Mr. Dalgreen. Won't you please step in?"

The door swung quietly open to reveal a small wood-paneled vestibule. It wasn't until the door closed again that Brent recognized it as an elevator. There was a feeling of motion and the end wall slid back to reveal a book-lined sitting room. The occupant turned from his desk and stepped forward.

Brent took the proffered hand—at the same time trying to penetrate the man's smile. Di Costa was taller than Brent with

a thinness that seemed to contradict his graceful movements. They shook hands, and his hand had the same qualities; thin, long and strong. At this point Brent realized he was staring; he hastened to respond to his host's hospitality.

"I hope you will excuse my just dropping in like this, Mr. Di Costa. I have seen some work of yours at the Metropolitan, and found it, well, very interesting."

Brent stopped, aware of how weak his reasons seemed when brought out in conversation. He was more than pleased when Di Costa interrupted him.

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Dalgreen. I have had the same experience many times when looking at your paintings and those of some of our fellow artists." He smiled. "Not all of them, I assure you. I have looked at these works and said to myself, I would like to meet the man who did that. This very rarely happens, a fact which I deplore. That you feel the same way towards my work is both flattering and most enjoyable."

Di Costa's friendliness broke the ice; they were soon on the best of terms. Brent sat in the comfortable leather chair while Di Costa mixed drinks at the built-in bar. This gave him a chance to look around the room.

A brown study, it fitted the word. The decorations were all subdued to the room as a whole, the sort of things a man would buy for himself. The only clashing note was the rotary book rack in the corner.

He suddenly realized that it was revolving slowly, had been doing so since he first entered the room. Something else . . . yes, there on the desk, the bronze ashtray was also revolving with the same steady motion. They created an unusual effect, yet an oddly pleasing one. It fitted the room and the owner's personality.

"And here are the drinks. A toast first—always a good idea. Long life and good painting, to both of us."

Brent frowned to himself as he sipped the drink.

There is a fascination about shop talk that carpenters and bank executives indulge in with equal pleasure. Brent found himself easily drawn into conversation on the merits of alizarin crimson and the influence of Byzantine art on Renaissance Italy. Yet all the time he talked a small portion of his mind was weighing the other's words, testing and observing. But his host was everything he seemed to be—a gentleman of private means with an active interest in painting.

A half hour had passed, entertaining but unenlightening, when a light rap sounded on the study door. It opened to reveal an attractive woman, tastefully dressed in a gray and silver robe of classic Greek design, the latest fashion.

She hesitated in the doorway. "I don't mean to disturb you, Arthur, but there is . . . oh, excuse me, I had no idea you had a guest."

Di Costa took her gently by the arm. "I'm very glad you did, my dear. Let me introduce the famous Brent Dalgreen." He passed his arm around her waist. "My wife, Marie."

Brent took her hand and smiled into her large brown eyes. She returned his greeting warmly—with exactly the right amount of pressure on his hand. A loving wife, a pleasant home—Arthur Di Costa was a model of the modern gentleman. The painting in the museum seemed unimportant in the face of all this normality.

For a fraction of an instant as he held her hand, his eyes were drawn to a portrait that hung next to the door.

It was only by the strongest effort of will that he prevented himself from crushing her hand. Marie was there in the portrait, her portrait . . .

The same subtle transformation as the painting in the museum. Something about a twist of the mouth—the haunting look in her eyes as she stared out of the picture. He tore his gaze from the painting but not before Di Costa had noticed his attention.

"It must be a strange sensation," Di Costa laughed, "to meet both my beautiful Marie and her portrait at the same instant. But here, let me show you." He touched the frame and a soft light bathed the painting. Brent mumbled something polite and stepped nearer, as if mere proximity would answer his questions.

Di Costa seemed flattered by his famous guest's interest. They discussed the many problems of a painting and their happy or unhappy solution. Blushing slightly, Marie was coaxed into standing under her portrait. She pretended not to notice the dissecting artistic analysis that could be so embarrassing to the outsider. "That blue hollow in the neck helps the form . . ." ". . . the effect of the gold hair on the cheekbones . . ." She turned her head "just so," and "a little more" while they talked.

Yet all during the discussion a small part of Brent's mind was weighing and analyzing. The

how of the paintings was becoming clearer although the *why* still escaped him. It wasn't that there was an alienness in the figure itself; it was more as if the person were looking at something totally strange to worldly eyes.

He felt the small throb of an incipient headache as his frustrated thoughts danced dizzily inward on themselves in ever tightening circles. The mellow sound of a chime from the wall cabinet provided a welcome interruption. Di Costa excused himself and stepped out of the room — leaving Brent alone with Marie. They had just seated themselves when Di Costa returned, looking as if he had received painful news.

"I must ask you to excuse me, but my lawyer wishes to see me at once—a small but important matter about my estate. I am most unhappy to leave now. We must continue our talk another time. Please do not leave on my account, Mr. Dalgreen — my house is at your service."

When her husband left, Brent and Marie Di Costa talked idly on irrelevant topics, they *had* to, since he had no idea of what might be relevant. You couldn't walk up to a girl whom you'd met for the first time and ask, "Madam, does your husband paint monsters? Or perhaps you

dabble in witchcraft! Is that the secret?"

A quick glance at his watch convinced him it was time to go, before he wore out his welcome.

Turning to light a cigarette his eyes fell on the mantle clock. He registered surprise.

"Why, it's three-thirty already! I'm afraid I'll have to be leaving."

She rose, smiling. "You have been a most delightful guest," she laughed. "I know I speak for Arthur as well as myself when I say I hope to see you again."

"I may take you up on that," Brent said.

Their forward progress was suddenly impeded as the elevator swung open to discharge a small bundle of screaming humanity. Dazed, Brent realized it was a young girl as she swept past. The child collapsed on Marie Di Costa's shoulder, her golden hair shaking with muffled sobs. A plastic doll with a shattered head gave mute evidence of the source of the disturbance.

Brent stood by self-consciously until the crying was soothed. Marie flashed him an understanding smile while she convinced the child at least to say hello to the visitor. He was rewarded with the sight of the red, tear-stained face.

"Dotty, I want you to meet Mr. Dalgreen."

"How do you do, Mr. Dalgreen . . . but Mommy the boy stepped on the doll and he laughed when it broke and . . ." The thought was once again too much to bear — the tears began to course again through the well-used waterways.

"Cheer up, Dotty. You wouldn't want your father to see you like this," Brent suggested.

These seemingly innocent words, while having no effect on the little girl, had a marked effect on her mother. Her face whitened.

"Arthur is not Dotty's father, Mr. Dalgreen. You see, this is my second marriage. He . . . I mean we cannot have children." She spoke the words as if they were a pain, heavy within her.

Brent was slightly embarrassed — yet elated at the same time. This was the first crack in the facade of normality that concealed the occupants of the house. Her sudden change of expression could only mean that there was something troubling her — something he would give his last tube of oil paint to find out. Perhaps it wasn't the secret hidden in the painting, but there must be a relationship somewhere. He was determined to search it out.

Apartment lights were out all over the city, the daytime world was asleep. Brent stirred in the large chair and reached out for the glass of sparkling Burgundy that was slowly dying on the end table. A little flat — but still very good. It was one of the luxuries he allowed himself. A luxury that might really be called a necessity to one who lived by selling his emotional responses, translated into color.

The wine was going flat, but the view of the city never would. New York, the eternal wonder city. The soft lights of his studio threw no reflections on the window, and his sight travelled easily over the architectural fairyland. Sparkling search-beams swept across the sky, throwing an occasional glint as they slid across a jetcar or a stratosphere. A thousand lights of a thousand hues twinkled in the city below. Even here on the one-hundred-eightieth floor he could hear the throbbing roar of its ceaseless activity. This was the foremost of the cities of man, yet somewhere in that city was a man who was . . . not quite human.

Brent had the partial answer, he was sure of that. He had found the missing factor in one of his own paintings. It was the only one he was even slightly pleased with. He had turned it

out in nine solid hours of work, one of the "dangerous exposures" the doctors talked about. He had it propped on the video console, a stark vista of Mare Imbrium in the afternoon — moon time. It was a canvas touched with the raw grandeur of eternal space. It had a burning quality that reacted on human sight. An alien landscape seen through a human eye. Just as the Di Costa canvases were human scenes seen through a different eye. Perhaps not totally foreign to earth — they weren't that obvious. Now that he understood, though, the influence was unmistakable.

He also had substantiating evidence. The Law was the Law and genes would always be genes. Man and ape are warm-blooded mammals, close relatives among the anthropoids. Yet even with this close heritage, there could be no interbreeding. Offspring were out of the question; they were a genetic impossibility.

It followed that alienness meant just that. A man who wasn't Man — homo sapiens — could never have children with a human wife. Marie Di Costa was human, and had a real tear-soaked human daughter to prove it. Arthur Di Costa had no children.

Brent pressed the window release and it sank into the case-work with a soft sigh. The city noises washed in along with the fresh smell of growing things. The light breeze carried the fragrance in from the Jersey woodlands. It seemed a little out of place here above the gleaming city.

Leaning out slightly, he could see the moon riding through the thin clouds and the morning star, Venus, just clearing the eastern horizon. He had been there on the moon. He had watched them assembling the first Venus rocket. Man, the erect biped, was the only sentient life form he had ever seen. If there were others, they were still out there among the stars. All, that is, except one . . . or could there possibly be others here on Earth?

This was useless thinking though. Don't invent more monsters until you've caught your first. A night's sleep first. After that, he could start setting his traps out tomorrow.

For the tenth time, Brent threw a half-eaten candy bar into the receptacle and started down the street. Being a private eye was so easy in the teleshows — but how different the reality was! He had been shadowing Arthur Di Costa for three days

now, and it was ruining his digestion. Whenever his quarry stopped, he stopped — often on the crowded city streets. Loitering was too obvious, so he found himself constantly involved with the vending machines that lined the streets. The news sheets were easily thrown away, but he felt obliged at least to sample the candy bars.

Di Costa was just stepping onto the Fifth Avenue walkway. Brent got on a few hundred feet behind him. They rolled slowly uptown at the standard fifteen miles per hour. As the walkway crossed Fifty-Seventh Street, a small man in a black and gold business suit stepped briskly onto it. Brent noticed him only when he stopped next to Di Costa and tapped him on the shoulder. Di Costa turned with a smile — which changed slowly into a puzzled expression.

The little man handed what appeared to be a folded piece of paper to the surprised painter. Before Di Costa could say anything, the man stepped off the walkway onto a safety platform. With a quick movement, surprising in a man of his chunky build, he vaulted the guard barrier and stepped onto the downtown walkway.

Brent could only stare open-mouthed as the black figure swept by him and was lost in

the crowds. Surprised by the entire action, he turned back to find Di Costa staring directly into his eyes!

Whatever course of action he might have considered was lost. Di Costa took the initiative. He smiled and waved. Brent could hear his voice faintly through the street noises.

"Mr. Dalgren, over here!"

Brent waved back and did the only thing possible. As he walked slowly forward he saw that Di Costa's curiosity had gotten the better of him. Brent watched him open the note, read it — and change suddenly. The man's arm dropped to his side, his body stiffened. Staring straight ahead, he stood on the walkway, eyes fixed and as full as a Roman portrait bust.

Dalgren hurried toward the man. Events were going too fast. He had more than a suspicion that the note and the short man were somehow connected with the secret of the paintings. He stepped forward.

The man stared ahead, unseeing and unhearing. Brent felt justified in removing the mysterious note from between his fingers. One side was blank, but the other contained a single illegible character—queer sign made up of flowing curves crossed by choppy green lines.

It resembled nothing Brent had ever seen in his entire life.

They rode uptown side by side. Brent leaned on the railing while Di Costa remained fixed in his strange trance. The note in Brent's hand was tangible evidence that his suspicions had some basis in fact. As he examined it again, he was aware of an undefinable tingling in his hand. The note seemed to be vibrating, shaking free from his hand in some unknown way. Under his startled gaze it glowed suddenly. — and disappeared! One instant he had held it, the next his hand was empty.

He leaped back in surprise — passing through the space formerly occupied by Di Costa. Gone — while he had been studying the note! Leaning over the rail he had a quick glimpse of the stiff figure entering the Central Park Skyport. Cursing himself for his stupidity, Brent changed lanes and raced back to the Skyport entrance.

His luck still held. Di Costa was on the outgoing air cab line. It would take him at least ten minutes to get a cab this time of day. With a little speed and a few greased palms Brent could rent a Fly-Your-Own before the other man was airborne.

Shortly after, the orange and black cab flashed up from the take-off circle followed closely

by Brent's blue helio. The two aircraft flew north and vanished in the distance over the Hudson.

The air cab stayed at the 10,000 foot level. Brent cruised at 8,000, lagging slightly behind, keeping in the blind spot of the other ship. The entire affair was moving too fast for his peace of mind. He had the feeling that he was no longer a free agent, that he was being pushed into things before he decided for himself.

He suddenly felt elated. The strange symbol on the note, the note that disappeared in such an inexplicable fashion, *proved* the existence of alien hidden forces. Every mile that rushed under his plane brought him closer to the answer. He didn't fear death — it was no longer a stranger to him. The moments of time left to him might be made more satisfactory if he ferreted out this secret. He smiled to himself.

Fifteen minutes later the two ships grounded at the Municipal Skyport in Poughkeepsie. Brent parked the ship and followed his quarry down to the street level. Except for a certain stiffness in his movements, Di Costa seemed normal. He walked quickly and turned into an office building before Brent could catch up with him.

Throwing discretion aside, Brent broke into a run. He turned into the lobby just as the elevator door closed. He pressed the call button but the car continued to rise. The indicator stopped at four, then slowly sank down again.

He was too close to the end to even consider stopping now. He stepped into the self-service elevator and pressed four. The door closed and the car began to . . . descend!

With the realization that he was trapped came the knowledge that there was very little he could do about it. Just wait and see who — or *what* — might be outside the car when the door opened!

The elevator dropped down to a level that must have been far beneath the basement floor. The door slid slowly back.

The room was *not* what he had expected. Not that he had any idea of what there would be; it was just — just that this room was so ordinary!

Ordinary — except for the side wall. That was an impossibility. It was a glass wall looking into a vast tank of swirling water — only there was no glass! It was the surface of the ocean standing on its side. He felt himself drawn into it, falling into it.

The sensation vanished as the

wall suddenly turned jet black. He became aware for the first time that he wasn't alone in the room. There was a girl behind a chrome desk. A lovely girl with straight bronze hair and green eyes.

"An untrained person shouldn't watch that machine, Mr. Dalgren; it has a negative effect on the mind. Won't you please step in?"

His jaw dropped. "How do you know my name? Who are you? What is this place?"

"If you'll be seated, I'll be with you in a moment."

Brent saw that the elevator would stay here until he got out. He stepped into the room, and the door sliding shut behind him didn't help his morale any. He was into it up to his neck, and the other team had taken complete charge. He sat.

The redhead pulled the sheet of paper out of her typewriter and pushed it into the strange wall. It once more had the undersea look. Brent kept his eyes averted until she turned to him with a slight frown furrowing her forehead.

"You have been very interested in Arthur Di Costa's activities, Mr. Dalgren. Perhaps there are some questions you would like to ask me?"

"That, lady, is the world's best understatement! Just *what*

happened to him today . . . and what is this place?"

She leaned forward and pointed. "You're responsible for Mr. Di Costa's visit here today. You were observed following him, so we brought him in, in the hope that you would come also. The message he received was a code word designed to trigger an automatic response planted in his mind. He came directly here, controlled by the psychotropic suggestion."

"But the note," he exclaimed. "A simple matter! It was written on a material made entirely of separate molecules. A small charge of energy held them together for a brief period of time. The charge leaked out and the material merely separated into its constituent molecules."

The utter impossibility of the situation was striking home. The evidences of a superior culture were unmistakable. These people were his . . .

"Aliens, Mr. Dalgren — I suppose you could call us that. Yes, I can read your mind quite clearly. That is why you are here today. A thought receiver in Arthur Di Costa's study informed us of your suspicions when you first walked in. We have been following you ever since, arranging your visit here.

"I'll tell you what I can, Mr. Dalgren. We are not of Earth, in fact, we come from beyond your solar system. This office is, to be very frank, the outpatient ward of a sanitarium!" "Sanitarium!" Brent shouted. "This is the office only . . . then where is the sanitarium?"

The girl twirled her pencil slowly, her piercing stare seeming to penetrate his eyes — into his brain.

"The entire Earth is our sanitarium. Mixed in with your population are a great number of our mentally ill."

The floor seemed to tilt under Brent's feet. He clutched the edge of the desk. "Then Di Costa must be one of your outpatients. Is he insane?"

The girl spoke quietly. "Not insane in the strictest sense of the word. He is congenitally feeble-minded; his case is incurable."

Brent thought of the brilliant Di Costa as a moron, and the inference shook his mind. "That means that the average I.Q. of your race must be . . ."

"Beyond your powers of comprehension," she said. "To your people Di Costa is normal, really far above average."

"On his home planet he was not bright enough to take his place in that highly integrated society. He became a ward of

the state. His body was altered to be an exact duplicate of homo sapiens. We gave him a new body and a new personality — but we could not change his basic intelligence. That is why he is here on Earth, a square peg in a square hole.

"Di Costa spent his childhood on his home planet, living in an 'alien' environment. These first impressions drive deep into the subconscious, you know. His new personality has no awareness of them — but they are there, nonetheless. When he is painting, these same impressions by-pass his conscious mind and operate directly on his thalamus. It takes a keen eye to detect their effect on the final work. May I congratulate you, Mr. Dalgren?"

Brent smiled ruefully, "I'm a little sorry now that I did. What are your plans for me? I imagine they don't include a return to my earthly 'asylum'?"

The girl folded her hands in her lap. She looked down at them as if not wanting to look Brent in the eye when she made her next statement. However, he wasn't waiting for it. If he could overpower the girl, he might find the elevator control — any chance was worth taking. He tensed his muscles and jumped.

A wave of pain swept through his body. Another mind —

strong beyond comparison — was controlling his body!

Every muscle jerked with spasmodic activity, halting his plunge in mid-air. Crashing to the desk he lay unmoving; every muscle ached with the fierce alien control. The redhead looked up — eyes blazing with the strength she had so suddenly revealed.

"Never underestimate your opponent, Brent Dalgren. I adopted the earthly form of a woman for just this reason. I find your people much easier to handle. They never suspect that I am . . . more than what they see. I will release your mind from my control, but please don't force me to resume it."

Brent sank to the floor, his heart pumping wildly, his body vibrating from the unnatural spasm.

"I am the director of this . . . sanitarium, so you see I have no desire to have our work exposed to the prying eyes of your government. I shall have to have you disposed of."

Brent controlled his breathing enough to allow him to speak. "You . . . intend to . . . kill me then?"

"Not at all Mr. Dalgren, our philosophy forbids killing except for the most humane reasons. Your physical body will be

changed to conform to the environment of another of our sanitarium planets. We will of course remove all the radiation damage. You can look forward to a long and interesting life. If you agree to cooperate you will be allowed to keep your present personality."

"What kind of a planet is it?" Brent asked hurriedly. He realized from the girl's tones that

the interview was almost at an end.

"Quite different from this one. It is a very dense planet with a chlorine atmosphere." She pressed a stud on her desk and turned back to her typewriter.

Brent had a last, ragged thought as unconsciousness overcame him. He was going to live . . . and work . . . and there, must be some fine greens to paint on a chlorine planet . . .

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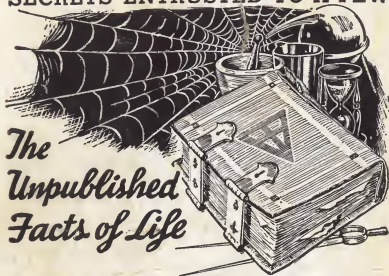
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